

Built On Ashes by deathvalleyusa

Series: SATC/BOA (reupload) [2]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy Hargrove Lives, Billy goes through it, F/M, Fix-It, Growing Up, Long-Distance Relationship, Multi, Period Typical Attitudes, Pregnancy, Romance, Shadow Monster | Mind Flayer Possessing Billy Hargrove, Smut, Time Skips

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Billy's Mom, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove, Original Female Character(s), Shadow Monster | Mind Flayer, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove/Original Female Character(s), Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Original Character(s)

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-06-01

Updated: 2021-07-14

Packaged: 2022-03-31 11:22:11

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 30

Words: 107,358

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Immediately following the events of Something About The Clouds, a strange occurrence in Hawkins changes Billy and Chrissy's lives forever.

REUPLOAD

1. life's the same

JUNE 18TH.

It was almost unsettling how fast word got around, even now that high school had ended. Chrissy had been single for a little more than a week and the entirety of Starcourt Mall seemed to know. Months ago, she might have revelled in the attention. Now she was just tired.

Kimberly, another girl she worked with, would collect numbers given to Chrissy to light on fire during their smoke breaks. There had been a few times a guy was cute enough to entertain the thought of a date or two. It never seemed to stick, and that scrap of paper would go up in flame like the rest of them.

She thought about messing around with her shift manager, Terry, a couple times. He was cute in a gangly sort of way, kind brown eyes. The total opposite of Billy. It would've been a nice reprieve. But Terry, she learned, had a girlfriend who he was so dedicated to it almost made Chrissy want to heave. *Truly* the opposite of Billy.

All this meant when Mitch walked into Spencer's one Saturday afternoon, Chrissy surprised herself.

He certainly wasn't her usual type. Not that Chrissy necessarily *had* a type.

Mitch carried himself with ease. A flannel-clad, messy haired man who definitely had seen a few summers on the farms around the Hawkins area. Baby faced under the stubble around his cleft chin. A rugged Simon Le Bon, she realized. Perhaps more her type than she thought.

"You got nose rings in stock at all?" he asked, leaning against the counter. Chrissy blinked, eyes flitting from his near-black eyes to the small silver stud on his left nostril.

“Uh, yeah,” she said, setting aside the tagging gun and rolled posters. She motioned for him to follow, walking towards the upright case. “You looking for a specific color?”

“Plain ol’ steel works just fine,” he answered, looking at the selection. “Lost my favorite one and I hate studs. Figured I’d come in and grab one after work, y’know?”

“Gotcha.” Chrissy unlocked the case, scanning the selection.

Her hand reached out swiftly, grabbing a pack at the bottom before handing it to him. “This one’s got two rings. In case you manage to lose one again,” she teased.

“Good thinking,” he smiled.

He took the package from her hand, his larger hand enveloping her own. A series of thumps resounded in her chest, catching her off guard. Black eyes caught hers, flitting down to her name tag before looking back into the case.

“You think I should get a few more, Chrissy? Different colors, switch it up a bit?” he asked, folding his arms.

“Up to you...?”

“Mitch.”

“Mitch,” she repeated. “Though, I think the oil slick ones are pretty spiffy.”

“I’ll take ‘em.”

“Where do you work?” Chrissy asked, trying to sound nonchalant. “I mean, not a lot of places allow face piercings.”

“Uh, Hess Farm. You’ve probably seen me there during the haunted corn maze. I’m the one with the Leatherface mask.”

“That’s you?” she said incredulously, a laugh wrapping around her words. “I almost punched you last year, I’m so sorry.”

“It happens,” he chuckled. He checked his watch, thick eyebrows raised in surprise. “Hey, I gotta head out, but you want to continue this conversation later? Sans the whole work environment?”

It was Chrissy’s turn to raise her eyebrows. “Like... a date? Or hanging out?”

“Date, hanging out, it’s up to you,” Mitch shrugged, a warm smile playing on his lips. “You seem like a cool chick. I can always use some more cool people to hang out with.”

“Y-Yeah,” she said, the pounding in her chest returning tenfold. “Uh, let me get you checked out. I’ll decide once I’ve made a sale.”

He laughed, handing over the plastic packages. Everything about him seemed so open and warm. As she rang up his purchase, Chrissy came to a decision. It wouldn’t hurt to have some fun after all the hell she had put up with the past month. Like he said, it would probably be beneficial to make a new friend, get out of the high school bubble.

She handed back his change and a sticky note with her number scribbled on it.

“I’m off at five,” she said, biting her lip to hold back a grin. “Give me a call, figure something out.”

“Cool.” That warm smile spread across his face again. “Thanks. The oil slick ring may make its debut tonight.”

The diner wasn’t very busy, to her surprise. It was the first place either of them could think of. Neutral ground, devoid of expectations and *cheap*.

Chrissy knew she was a sucker. Mitch’s face was gorgeous and calm, smoke hanging around the short, wispy ends of his black hair. A tiny voice in her wouldn’t stop proclaiming that it was *fate*; that he was

meant to be here to break the spell Billy had put over her. The voice was dead wrong. She knew that with her whole being. If only it would shut up for a second and let her enjoy the fucking moment of reprieve.

“You ever listen to The Three O’Clock before?” Mitch asked, taking a drag of his cigarette. He smoked Camels; the lack of the bright red packaging of Billy’s chosen brand was a relief.

“Nope,” Chrissy answered, taking a drink of her lemonade. “They good?”

“*Fantastic*. Real psychedelic. If you like The Bangles, I think you might dig them.”

It wasn’t really her music taste, but she was willing to give a listen. *Expand your horizons, Chrissy, she thought wryly. Just like Mom keeps telling you.*

“There’s a band playing at Wolski’s tonight,” he added, swirling his iced tea in the glass. “Few buddies from the farm are in it, they mostly do covers but they’re solid. Care to go?”

“Wolski’s?” she repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Dude, I’m eighteen. They aren’t gonna let me in.”

“So? I’m only twenty, they let me in all the time,” he smiled, waving his hand to shoo her concerns away. “They’ll just draw a smiley face on your hand or something so they know you can’t drink.”

Chrissy shrugged. “If you say so. If we get kicked out, it’s your fault.”

“They won’t kick you out if you’re with me.”

“Sure,” she said, giving a half-cocked smile. “So, what do they play?”

“Uh, CCR, Zeppelin, Bowie. Iron Maiden.” Mitch paused. “They’re very... diverse.”

Mitch was certainly right about the band having a vast catalog of music to play. It was a little ridiculous, if Chrissy was honest. Still, there was obviously an audience for them in this small town, and with an abysmal nightlife in Hawkins, it was hard to be picky.

She settled against Mitch, whose arm slung over her shoulder. He seemed perfectly content with the situation, every so often tapping the beat of a song against her collarbone. Chrissy was surprised; he wasn't handsy, like most guys she came across. She was beginning to suspect he was an alien. Or a robot.

It put her at ease, though. Even if he had seen her at school before he graduated, it was long before her reputation had become a hindrance. There were no expectations here. She was just some girl who worked at Spencer's who he happened to find cute.

"I'm gonna get a drink," she announced over the band. "Want anything?"

"I'm good," Mitch answered, giving her a wink. "You want me to pay for it?"

"I think I can cover it," Chrissy teased, biting her lip as she made her way to the bar.

The clink of glasses as they settled into the metal sink behind the bar drew her attention as she waited for her drink. A soda, since mixers were the only thing she was allowed to have besides water. She probably could have gotten some faux-cocktail, but it seemed almost more pathetic than just a soda by itself.

God, she thought. I wish I could just have a frickin' beer.

As soon as she forked over a dollar, she meandered to the front of the bar, taking a sip as she looked out on the street from the dirty windows. Daylight was still trying to hang on, bathing the town in a warm pinkish glow as it battled with the incoming dusk. Everything felt at peace until a familiar sound overtook Chrissy's ears.

It was near Pavlovian, her response to the sound of the Camaro tearing down 5th Street. Her heart jumped, breath hitching a bit as the deep blue car came to a halt and turned into the parking lot. Dread swept over her, a hundred questions running through her brain. She didn't want to talk to him. Hell, she really didn't want him to see her out with someone else at this point. If she asked Mitch if they could leave, it'd cause more of a scene than just staying. Perhaps if she nestled further into the small crowd, she could avoid the blonde altogether.

As she made her way back to Mitch, nearly spilling her drink a few times, she made the mistake of looking back. Billy had made his way inside and seen her. The way his eyes pierced through her only made her more sure she wanted as much space between them as possible. They were a lit match and gunpowder. Keeping away from each other meant the world around them was safe from the potential explosion. Stealing one last glance at the blonde, Chrissy slipped a hand into Mitch's.

She debated how far she'd be willing to let this night go. Before Billy had shown up, Chrissy had waffled between a kiss goodnight and making out. Now, there was a desire to prove she didn't need the blonde anymore. Maybe she'd fuck Mitch.

She turned her head to look at Mitch, who in turn glanced down at her, that amiable smile back on his face. It only took a few beats before he ducked down, pressing a kiss to her waiting lips. Slow kisses bloomed between them, the lazy guitar of a butchered David Bowie song setting the pace.

Chrissy didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved. It wasn't that Mitch was a bad kisser. While a heat had gathered in her, probably from the lack of anything remotely sexual in her life, the spark wasn't there. There was no electricity, nothing close to how she had felt kissing a certain blonde for the past few months.

As she pulled away, she stole a glance Billy's way. His face was hard, eyes diverting away once she caught his eye. He'd seen everything. His expression, as hard as he tried, was so telling of the thoughts running through his head that Chrissy almost felt bad.

Almost.

He gave her a glare before pushing his way through the crowded bar, the door flinging open with ferocity. A few of the other patrons watched as it slammed shut.

Chrissy's jaw set, a small stream of air blowing through her nose. She turned back to Mitch, hand tapping on his chest as she gave him a small kiss on the cheek.

"It's getting hot in here," she said. "I'm gonna get some air."

"Want me to come with?" he asked.

"Nah. I'll be fine."

"A real independent lady," he stated with a lazy smile. "I dig it."

As she pushed through the growing crowd, Chrissy felt anger replace the dread she had felt before. She couldn't have *one* thing to herself without Billy's presence ruining it. What was he expecting, seeing her with another guy? Chaste hand holding? He knew her better than that. She pushed the door open, stepping out into the warmth of the balmy summer evening.

"What's your deal?" she asked, voice almost shrill.

"Hello to you too, sunshine," Billy deadpanned, lighter flicking on and off as he lit his cigarette.

"You're not very subtle when you're stalking someone, are you?" Chrissy folded her arms, a petulant frown on her face.

"You think I'm keeping tabs on you?" He laughed, the sound almost scornful. "It's a small town, don't flatter yourself."

"Feels a little too convenient that you show up somewhere when I'm on a date."

"It's a local band. I wanted to get out of the house. Sue me."

The muffled drone of a guitar solo filled the silence as Chrissy glared

at him. Billy only stared back, his face a disaffected blank slate as he blinked.

He was right and she hated it. In Hawkins, it was impossible to avoid someone in public. If you wanted to stop seeing a person you disliked altogether, the best option was to move to Fort Wayne and pray you never ran into them again.

“Whatever,” she muttered, arms crossing tighter. “Doesn’t mean you have to stare at me whenever you see me.”

“You were staring right back.” Billy paused, blowing smoke out of his nose. “So, you screw him yet?”

“None of your business, dickweed.”

“So you haven’t,” he said, tongue tracing the ridges of his teeth. “If you want my opinion—”

“I really don’t.”

“— he doesn’t look like he would know how to fuck you right, anyway.”

Chrissy bristled, fingers gripping at her arms tight enough to whiten her knuckles. “Fuck you, Billy.”

Half-lidded eyes traced her face, a sardonic smile resting on his lips as he took another drag. He shrugged. “If you’re offering, sure. Just don’t expect me to get all cuddly after.”

“What is *wrong* with you?!”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

“Fuck,” she muttered under her breath before letting her voice grow louder. “Seriously. Just stay away from me, Billy.”

“Or what, you’ll sic whatever guy you’ve hooked up with on your new slut tour on me?” He blew out a breath from his nose, now glaring at her. “Give me a fuckin’ break.”

Chrissy turned on her heel to stomp back into the bar. “I hate you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Ten bucks says you call me tonight after you’re done with Nose Ring,” he called after her.

It was that type of shit that made her question why she had been with Billy in the first place. He always had to have the last word, always had to remind her that

Whatever. Chrissy slid past a cluster of patrons, finding her way back to Mitch. She wasn't about to let Billy ruin what had been a good, if tepid to this point, night. Perhaps that's what she needed after the whirlwind of the past few months. Billy was a wildfire, inescapable and consuming, while Mitch had the comfort of a campfire. Comforting, easy to leave and return to as she pleased.

And that was what she planned to do. Come and go as she wished, flitting through life without the desire for love dragging her down.

JUNE 29TH.

Billy Hargrove was understandably irate today.

He had been unprepared to take over Adam's swim class today. Normally, Billy's group were the young ones, kids still too small to know how to talk back and whose parents made them call him 'Mr. Billy'. Today however, he had been stuck with the 7+ group. Bunch of little fuckers who never had their goggles and constantly asked stupid questions.

The 7+ group happened to include Caitlin DiMartino. She wasn't a very strong swimmer, and tended to glom on to Billy when she could out of nervousness. Avoiding her questions about where he had been the past few weeks was a fucking nightmare.

There was a sense of relief at the end of class when Patty had come to collect Caitlin. She at least was civil, still friendly in the polite way that Midwestern moms tended to be. Patty being there meant he could avoid Chrissy's glance a little longer. After the fiasco at Wolski's, he didn't think he would be able to handle those wounded eyes, nor more words meant specifically to hurt him.

If she found herself a new distraction, fine. Screw her.

He could do the same. He had someone in mind, anyway, another challenge to keep his mind from wandering back to the mixed emotions. Billy had planted the seed months ago, long before he and Chrissy were even a thing, and he wanted to see if he could make it bloom.

Karen Wheeler.

After his lunch break, his plan took motion. The parade down the waiting line of bored mothers, a simple compliment thrown specifically Mrs. Wheeler's way. It was all just to test the waters.

As he sat on the lifeguard chair, catching a glimpse of Mrs. Wheeler every now and then, his resolve solidified. He felt like he couldn't sit still today, couldn't concentrate at his normal level. At this point, it was a literal countdown till his next break. *Twenty minutes*. He unwrapped in a piece of gum, popping small bubbles between his teeth in an attempt to relieve himself of boredom. *Fifteen*. He blew the whistle a few times, yelling at fucking Curtis for the umpteenth time this week. *Ten*. Mrs. Wheeler left her spot under the umbrella for the lanes.

She was eye candy, that was for sure. Near perfect backstroke, not a care in the world as she did laps. Billy had seen the loser she called a husband a few times while picking Max up at the Wheeler's. Always asleep or ignoring the world around him with a newspaper or the tv. There was no way she was getting what she needed from him.

Thank god his hour on watch was up. He couldn't remember a time he got off the chair as fast as he had just done. It was as if he was on autopilot. His feet carried him to Mrs. Wheeler's chosen spot, making small talk with the other ladies as he grabbed the light blue towel at

the foot of the chaise.

“Looking good out there Mrs. Wheeler,” he called out as he made his way to her.

“Thank you.”

“Perfect form,” he added, tilting his head as he handed a towel to the older woman.

“Well,” she gushed, “ *your* form is amazing.”

He couldn't help but let out a breathy, nearly giddy laugh as he looked away, scanning to see if anyone was watching. Hoping it looked slightly bashful, just to rustle up Mrs. Wheeler more.

“Sorry, I mean, I've seen you. Teaching. Lessons. Swimming lessons.”

Christ, she was flustered. Like a little school girl with her first big crush. Billy couldn't help but want to push it further, to see how far he could get her to go today. Part of him knew it only took a slight nudge to get her to do whatever he wanted.

“You know, I could, uh,” he started, making direct eye contact with her, “I could teach you if you like.” A flutter of his lashes and a smile really went a long way with this woman.

“Oh.”

“I know all the styles. Freestyle, butterfly,” he said slowly, taking a step towards her. Mrs. Wheeler was rapt with attention, hanging on to every word. As he unwrapped a piece of gum, he gave her a once over, grinning as he went in for the kill. “ *Breaststroke.* ”

Bingo. The towel slipped to the floor, Mrs. Wheeler seemingly short-circuiting at the thought. They both bent down. Billy managed to swipe the towel and handed it to her with a grin.

“You okay?” he teased.

“I didn't think— I didn't think you taught adults,” she said, trying to recover. That bubbly smile of hers widened, masking whatever was

going on in her pretty little head.

"I offer more, uh, advanced lessons to select clientele," he grinned.

"Oh." Her face looked disappointed for a moment. Billy, not willing to let this slide for a second, rattled on.

"Come to think of it, there is a good pool down at the Motel 6 on Cornwallis. It's very quiet. Y'know, very private."

It all seemed to click in that instant for Mrs. Wheeler. Billy gave another small grin, gum popping between his teeth. Part of him hoped someone had overheard this, watching the brazen display.

"Shall we say tonight? Eight o'clock?" Billy searching her warm brown eyes, watching as another bead of water took part of her makeup in a streak down her face.

There was a slight nod. Suddenly, it seemed to occur to Mrs. Wheeler what exactly was being propositioned, that this was no longer just play between them.

"I'm sorry," she finally said, bashful once again. "I can't."

"Can't what?" he asked, feigning naivety. His eyebrows creased in concern before a smile broke slowly on his face. "Have fun?"

"I just— I don't think I need any lessons," Mrs. Wheeler said, giving him a confident look.

"Oh, you see, I think you do. I just don't think you've had the right teacher."

"I, uh—"

"It will be," he rasped, "the workout of your *life*."

He knew in that moment, he had her. Tonight, he'd have something to look forward to, a respite from the moping and irritability that had engulfed him. He'd have a wild memory to look back on, something to hold on to during any lows that would hit him.

Eight o'clock rolled around quicker than he thought. The realization that he hadn't had a reason to go through his date routine in ages was a grim one. It seemed to be a thought that couldn't be avoided as he flit about his room.

The wave of relief with being single again came and went, sometimes rolling back far enough to reveal the fresh scar where Chrissy had been. With her gone, he was alone again. It had been uncomfortable at first; realizing he couldn't just pick up the phone and bitch about whatever came to mind, or stop by her house out of boredom. He'd bought Marlboro Golds along with his pack of Reds out of habit one time. Six months of little habits were hard to break.

He wondered if she was having the same problem. How many times she had seen something that reminded her of him. If his shirts she had taken still hung in her closet among the pastels and neons of her wardrobe. If waves of loneliness washed over her in the most unsuspecting moments.

She at least had Annette to help guide her through the pain. Billy had... Tommy, maybe. Word had gotten around to him that it was Tommy who had ratted him out to Chrissy. The idea of going to the freckled bastard for support was unappealing. He'd just have to deal with it alone.

Billy had been a loner most of his life. The adjustment could be made again. He could flit in and out of lives again as he chose. And that was exactly what he planned to do tonight. Swoop in, have his fun, and get the hell out before things got messy.

He rustled through his closet, eyes coming upon the red shirt he had worn the night he'd first met Mrs. Wheeler. Maybe that would be a good choice for tonight. Some nostalgia ought to get the lady hungry for him. Billy pursed his lips. Maybe not. It signaled he openly cared about tonight, and there was no way in hell he'd let a *housewife* hold

that over him. Fingers grasped at a navy button down instead.

He was done with the sentimental crap.

The Camaro sped down the empty street of Cornwallis, the noise from the engine echoing between the trees. Nightfall had already blanketed Hawkins, deadening the town that was barely alive to begin with.

Billy tapped along to the song thumping over the radio. A triumphant smile played at his lips, eyes flitting up to his rear view mirror. He caught a glimpse of himself, not a hair out of place, impeccably groomed and dressed, all to set the stage for tonight. A laugh slipped out, the knowledge that he was finally going to see the fruits of his labor tickling him pink. A hand flew up to the mirror, adjusting it slightly so his face was visible fully.

“Hey Karen,” he said to his reflection, voice sickly sweet. “You don’t mind if I call you Karen, do you?”

He could almost hear her voice, stuttering and bashful, telling him, “*Karen’s fine.*”

“Good,” he grinned to himself.

It all seemed to happen in an instant. Something smacked against his windshield with enough force to spin his car off the road. The squeal of his tires, the sickly smack of his head against the window as the Camaro collided with a thicket.

“Shit,” he muttered.

All he could think of was how fucking unfair it all was. He’d finally found a good way to get his mind off everything, he’d gotten his hopes up to have some *fun* , and now he was sitting, bleeding, in his piece-of-shit car.

As he got out to assess the damage, Billy mulled over whether or not Karen would still be down for their ‘swimming lesson’ if he showed

up with a gash on his head. She'd probably get all protective, try to fix his head up. He really wasn't in the mood to be mothered. Maybe she'd just roll with it, find his roughed-up appearance hot.

Gravel crunched under his boots as he made his way around the car, slamming the door closed loud enough for it to echo. The spidery crack on his windshield caught his eye, eyebrows furrowing as something glinted in the low light. Against his better judgement, Billy dipped a finger into the viscous substance, face screwing into disgust. He really didn't know what he expected. It didn't look like anything he had ever seen before.

His thoughts were interrupted by skittering behind him.

Are you fucking kidding me? He turned, eyes shifting back and forth in the dim light, hoping to see whatever had made the noise. Maybe it was the thing he hit, or some asshole who had thrown whatever hit his car in the first place.

"Who's there?"

No answer. With a few tentative steps, he called out again. "Hey! I said, who's there?"

Something wrapped around his ankle, pulling with enough force to bring him to the ground. It dragged him, Billy screaming and clawing at the ground in desperation. Dirt and debris under his nails, unable to get a grip until he hits the stairs. There was a moment he thought his strength would save him, that he could pull himself away. Panic rose in him, yells getting louder and more desperate as his fingers slipped from the steel doorway. His head hit the bottom of the stairs with a *clang*, the force enough to make his stomach flip over and over.

The only thing he can remember after that was a flesh-like appendage, attaching itself to his face and forcing something into him. The release from the *thing*, his adrenaline kicking in as he made his escape. The relief that the Camaro still drove, tires squealing as he peeled out of the lot, back toward the pay phone he had seen a mile back. Panic as he called 911. A deep sense of terror as he realized there was no way to explain what happened to him.

There wasn't enough time to figure out an explanation. The phone cut out, then the lights in the surrounding area. Everything seemed bathed in a sickly haze, the sky lit up with red clouds and lightning. The sound of footsteps came from the north, all measured and purposeful. Billy's heart thudded faster, a barrage of welts inside his chest as he stepped outside the booth.

"What do you want?!" Billy called out,

He was convinced he had a concussion. A bad one, one that made him hallucinate all of this. The flickering lights, the... *people*, his own fucking *self*. All of it had to be his mind in disarray from the crash.

"I said, what do you want?!"

To build. I want you to build.

"Build what?" His delirious mind couldn't hold back the question. This vision of himself chilled every cell in his body.

What you see.

It all seemed to dissipate with a flash of lightning. The phone booth lights flickered back on, street lamps coming back to life one by one. Cornwallis was quiet once more, except for Billy and his echoing shouts.

"I don't understand!"

He never got clarity on what his other self meant. It fucking haunted him the whole drive home, eyes flitting back in fear of seeing the throng of people with his dead-eyed self as their leader behind him.

Thank god everyone was asleep or gone when he returned. Neil and Susan had left on a mini-vacation to see some stupid air show in Wisconsin, leaving him and Max to fend for themselves over the holiday. The less questions tonight, the better. As he shut his

bedroom door, Billy rested his head on the wood, letting out a small groan.

Every part of his body hurt. Everything was on fire and so cold at the same time. The idea that what had happened was beyond a concussion seemed more likely as the minutes passed. He knew he was different; he was *ruined* somehow.

Billy peeled off his clothes, nausea returning at the sight of the unidentifiable black substance mixed with dirt on his tank top. A few ragged breaths came and went as he steadied himself, tossing the clothes in the laundry basket.

"Fuck," he muttered to himself.

For a brief moment, he thought of calling Chrissy. A familiar voice would have been a comfort. Whatever terrible thing that had seeped into him felt too dangerous to share, too overpoweringly disgusting to speak of. She wouldn't understand. The probability that she would hang up immediately was high anyway. Maybe it was for the best.

Curls stuck to his face, others hanging limply around his neck. His hands wouldn't stop shaking. With a wince, he hefted himself to his feet, shuffling towards the bathroom.

Clean. He had to wash this night off him.

A stream came from the shower head, lukewarm water coating his aching body as he rested a hand on the wall to steady himself. Eyes found the discolored spot on the tub, his mind devoid of thought besides a resounding '*why?*'. Why he had asked Karen to meet him in the first place. Why he walked away from his car instead of driving off. Why he had been shown a vision of himself and given such incomprehensible instructions.

He felt a creeping shiver up his spine, ears not quite ringing but filled with a fluttering hiss.

Billy winced, running his hands through tangled hair. After this, he was going to smoke a bowl and hope it'd knock him out for the rest of the night. The fresh memories were already burning themselves

onto the interior of his eyelids. He couldn't fucking handle this, not right now.

Tomorrow he'd figure this all out, or awake to realize it had been a long-ass nightmare.

2. sun burns

JUNE 30TH.

Chrissy was bored out of her fucking mind.

She'd already taken a few smoke breaks today, Spencer's being unusually dead enough that Terry had let pretty much anything slide. She'd been so starved for something to do that she had systematically gone through every aisle to straighten the shelves. Twice.

Boredom was the one thing she couldn't stand. It meant more time to think about things and people she'd rather not dwell on. Staying busy was a godsend.

It was now her actual lunch break, and she thanked whatever god that existed for a chance to mull around Starcourt for a half hour. After choking down a couple tacos from Ole' Amigo, she found herself with fifteen minutes left to burn. Without much thought, she made her way to Scoops Ahoy to grace the sailor uniform-clad workers with her presence.

Robin Buckley was the first sorry soul to catch Chrissy's attention. The two of them weren't necessarily on the best of terms, but working at Starcourt required some sense of solidarity. Their choice of what to bond over was a point of contention for Steve, however.

"Hey."

"Hey. How's the board?" Chrissy asked, leaning against the counter. "Still in the negative?"

"Woefully negative. *Dismally* negative. So negative it could write a Smiths album all by itself," Robin answered, a bit too much glee in her voice. "But, Steve and one of his child friends erased all of it, so we'll never know for sure how far south his game will go."

"Erased it?" She stood up straight again, giving an indignant look. "That was the only scientific thing I'll ever be invested in *ever*, and

it's gone? Why?!"

"You'd have to ask them." Robin leaned back on the counter behind her. "It's some top secret stuff, not my place to spill."

"Are they in back?"

"Yeah. But you know the deal. Can't let you in back without paying your toll."

She's still holding on to the stupid toll thing? Her high school antics, much to Chrissy's chagrin, were coming back to bite her in the ass. For the first half of senior year, her and her little group of friends had commandeered one of the girls' bathrooms, only letting in the less popular underclassman girls after a 'toll' had been paid. Sometimes it was a humiliating dare, other times it was goods or actual money. Robin had got the shit end of the stick multiple times and never forgot about it. Now, if she wanted to hang out in back for whatever reason, the price was a purchase and at least a 50% tip.

Chrissy pursed her lips, smacking down a few crumpled bills. She'd have to keep playing along if she wanted her curiosity sated. "Fine. Chocolate shake, no whipped cream. *Please.* "

Robin rang up the order, stuffing the extra change in her pocket. With a smarmy look, she bowed slightly, gesturing to the backroom's door. "All yours, DiMartino."

"You owe me, Stevie," Chrissy said pointedly, the door slamming shut behind her. "Whatever you did to the board better be good, because I just had to pay a fucking toll to get back here—"

Steve gave her a confused but annoyed look. The kid he was with also looked just about as confused, if not more annoyed by her presence. He looked familiar. Chrissy racked her brain for why, until she realized she had seen him hanging out with Max a few times.

"Is that Chinese?" she asked, pointing tentatively at the board.

"Russian," Steve and the kid said, nearly in unison.

"Steve, who is this? Why is she back here?" the kid asked, incensed.

"That's, uh, Chrissy," Steve explained. "Chrissy, this is Dustin. He found a secret Russian message—"

"— *Steve* —"

"— that we're trying to crack."

"Sounds stupid," Chrissy said. Nothing about this seemed remotely interesting, unlike her and Robin's precious tally. "Besides, I'm pretty sure Russian isn't even a real language. It's just like, a code or something. Like that beeping thing? Morrissey code?"

"Morse." Dustin gave her an incredulous look. "You *seriously* don't believe Russian is a real language? What else, you believe the world is flat?"

"Hey! I don't need to be patronized by a kid," she snapped.

"Hey, whoa, guys," Steve spoke up, motioning for everyone to calm down. "Seriously, cool it."

"I can't believe I wasted my break on *this*." Chrissy shot a glance towards Steve. "Can we hang out tonight? I really need the company."

"I mean, I'm kind of busy, Chris," he said apologetically. "I don't know how long this is gonna take and—"

"You'd rather do *this* than hang out with me?" Chrissy had expected more bite in her words, but they just came out as a pathetic heap. And truly, one of her closest friends deciding codes, Dustin and *Robin* were more interesting and worthwhile felt like the lowest of blows.

Steve shrugged, an apologetic smile on his face. "Sorry."

By the way his face fell, she knew how sullen her own features were, despite trying to hide it.

"No you aren't," she said, voice monotone. "Have fun, I guess. I gotta get back to work."

He was still waiting for the nightmare to fade.

The weed had done its job, relaxing him into unconsciousness even as his skin continued to crawl and ears rang with an unsettling noise he couldn't quite place. But as he awoke to his alarm, memories of last night flooded in, taking away his quiet few minutes and replacing them with a deep seated dread.

"Hey! Shut off your alarm!" Max's voice broke through, rousing him from whatever spiraling thoughts that plagued him.

"Fuck off, Max," he shouted back, slamming his hand down on the alarm to silence it. Quiet lasted only a few seconds more before the tv started to blare and the sound of cereal hitting a ceramic bowl leaked under his door. Typical sounds for their household. He held on to sweet normalcy for a few moments more before willing himself to get up.

Everything still hurt. His vision was slightly doubled, no doubt from hitting his head twice last night. The blurry reflection of himself in his mirror at least looked halfway normal, the bags under his eyes the only noticeable thing that carried over from the previous night. He leaned in, running a hand over his face before squeezing his eyes shut in hopes that his vision would correct itself. It didn't.

Billy stumbled out to the living room, giving only a passing glance to Max as she dug into her breakfast.

"You look like shit," she said as he walked towards the kitchen.

"I *feel* like shit," he answered dully.

"Then stay home," the redhead suggested. The clink of her spoon against the bowl made him wince a little.

As much as he wished he could just call in and lay in bed, riding out the mounting headache and aching bones, he knew work would give him some reprieve from the ugly noise buzzing in his head. The pool

would force him to focus on something else.

"Nah," Billy said. "I've got rent to pay now, remember? Besides, spending the day with you sounds like fucking torture."

He had made it to work without incident. Clocked in, avoided talking more than he needed to. All the while, he felt himself slipping, his grip on the world melting with the July heat.

It was almost as if he was on autopilot, feet plodding to the storage room when he had no business being there. His hand reaching out, grabbing a bottle of ammonia and slowly unscrewing the cap. Without a second thought, he tilted his head back, letting the liquid flow into his mouth and down his throat.

It scorched down his throat, this compulsion overriding his instincts. The entirety of his being screamed, telling him to go to a doctor, to just *stop* choking down the ammonia in his hand.

"Billy?"

He set the bottle of liquid down on the shelf with a plop. *Karen.*

"I...I understand if you're angry with me. I just... I wanted to explain why I didn't come last night."

Billy said nothing, shuddering as the chemicals seared his throat. It almost felt as if he was outside himself, not fully but enough for everything to blur and echo as the hiss started in his ear again.

"It's not you, it's just..." she trailed off. "I have a family. And I can't do anything that will hurt them."

She hadn't even shown up. *Bitch.*

She didn't want to hurt them, but she was willing to hurt you. Don't you want to —

At that point he couldn't even hear her voice over the sound of his own, deeper and resounding, in his head.

— hurt her back?

He was outside of his own body fully now, or at least it seemed. Watching it turn, letting out a grunt as it slammed Karen's head into the side of the shelves with such force her body spasmed as it plunked to the floor.

"Billy."

The walloping of his heart against his ribcage timed itself with his ragged breaths. He was back in himself, Karen still behind him, still trying to get him to talk to her. Unharmful. Billy turned around, eyes meeting hers in an attempt to steady his vision. She looked surprised, but whether it was from his haggard appearance or the deathly glare he gave was debatable.

"Stay away from me, Karen."

He didn't stick around to hear what she had to say.

As he made his way out into the sunlight, he felt every pore simultaneously scream in agony. His once beloved summer had turned on him in a flash. Sunlight seared brighter than it had before, the heat now almost too much to bear. No one seemed to think it out of the ordinary, his stumbling and pained looks. Sure, he'd shown up once or twice hungover, but he was always present and alert as he could be. Billy realized, once again, no one truly looked at him close enough to notice.

The umbrella over the chair provided little relief. He looked up,

almost mentally cursing the sun, before taking a shaky breath and squeezing his eyes shut.

I want you to build.

With a gasp, he lurched forward, realizing he had dozed off for a second. The world was still too bright, too saturated for his vision to handle. He noticed a grotesque sizzling sound coming from the side of the chair. A wave of pain emanated up his arm. Looking down, he saw flesh, bubbled and red.

Shower. Water. He needed to cool the hell off, figure this out. Come back to himself and steady himself.

Billy stumbled his way into the throng of people around the pool, the dizzying heat fucking with his vision even more than before. A shoulder connected with his own, the sound of plastic hitting the ground as the contents of a cooler spilled around him. He barely registered what the man carrying it said.

“Billy, are you okay?” came Heather’s voice, muffled and echoing all at once. He paid her no mind. The showers were his only line of thought.

As water poured over him, the sunburn on his arm turned a sickly black. Veins raised under his skin, the black trickling through and wrapping around to his inner forearm. He was panicking now, unable to see clearly while the noise kept buzzing in his head. Gingerly, he touched where the black veins pooled the largest, feeling his stomach turn as it made its way up his limb.

It was as if he was being shocked and stabbed at the same time. Every neuron fired at once, a flash of a shadow in the hell where he had been searing itself into his retinas. All he could hear was high pitched screeching. Billy covered his ears as he slipped down to the tile, finding no relief as his yells intermingled with the shrill noise in

his head.

“Billy?”

He looked up, trying to steady himself. His vision was still unfocused, the stream of water not helping a bit.

“Billy.”

Heather?

As she came into focus, bending down to his level, a chill swept over Billy. Those doe eyes of hers stared straight into him, wisps of hair framing her face that was devoid of emotion. He swallowed hard, feeling the whine in his ear die away. *No*. It didn't leave. It seemed to shift in front of him, wrapping itself around words that he couldn't understand.

“Take me to him.”

“What?” Billy managed to croak out.

“I said, are you okay?” Concern riddled her face.

He understood then what the words meant. It wanted him to take her back to the warehouse. Bring her into the madness, lock her inside herself bit by bit until there was nothing left but something to use for it's own gain.

If he could just hold on a little longer, tell her to get away—

Another wave of the ringing in his ears swept over, loud enough to make him dig his fingers into the flesh of his thighs. The Shadow was done showing him what to do, done trying to coerce him. It didn't like the resistance that it hadn't foresaw. Though it didn't speak to him this time, he could *feel* what it felt, the irritation and anger.

His hand shot out, pressing against her neck as she let out gasps, trying to breathe.

Again, he was barely outside of himself, watching as Heather was pulled into the shower stall, pressed hard against the divider as she

struggled. There was no sound from his lips no matter how much he yelled. Whatever was in him had control so thoroughly now. Tears welled up, and for a moment it registered that he could *feel* them slip down his face with the water of the showerhead.

As her arms gave way and body went limp, his hands let go. Heather crashed to the floor in a heap, head smacking against the cement a bit too hard.

She was motionless, breathing shallow but enough that he knew she would be okay. He noticed a steady trickle of blood from her forehead now. Heather couldn't stay here. She needed to go home, needed a doctor. Needed to be far away from him.

It felt like he was split in two. Inside, he was hyperventilating, outside, there was nothing. Collected breaths, a twitch of his hand as he tried to regain some sense of control.

Give in, Billy.

The more you fight, the more I will hurt you.

It was his voice echoing in his head, but it *wasn't* . Too measured.

You don't want to hurt, do you?

"Fuck you," he spat. His lips didn't move with the words. It was just more echoes in between his ears.

His stomach did another flip as his mouth curled into a grin, hand gripping the cool metal of the handle. It shut off the shower before moving Heather's unconscious body halfway out of the stall. He stood, looking at Heather for a few seconds before calling out.

“Hey, someone come help! Heather hurt herself!”

Whatever is using his voice sounds convincingly unnerved and concerned. It was enough to get Adam and Katie, the other lifeguards on duty today, into the showers.

“What the hell happened?” Katie asked, bending down to look at Heather.

“Heather came to check on me,” The Shadow said in his voice. “I got a nasty sunburn and she heard me yell when I accidentally touched it. Must of slipped on the wet floor and knocked herself out.”

“Shit,” Adam muttered, rubbing his hand across his face. “Do we call an ambulance?”

“I can take her to the hospital,” he — *it* — offered. “There’s no need to scare everyone at the pool with an ambulance.”

Adam gave him a wary look before nodding. “Y-Yeah. That would work. You’re off now anyway.”

“She’ll be fine,” The Shadow said, slowly bending down to look at the unconscious lifeguard. “I’ll take care of her.”

In some sense, he felt back in control as he picked Heather up, cradling her as he and the other lifeguards made their way out of the shower area. Adam helped situate her in the passenger seat before walking off to take his shift.

The thing about no one *truly* noticing him was how easy it was to slip back into the pool area. How easy it was to get into the storage shed and emerge with rope twisted around his shoulder. How a roll of duct tape could go missing from the front desk, and no one would suspect him. If anyone noticed how eerily calm he was acting now despite his off demeanor earlier, Heather might have been safe.

She deserved to be safe. She had been nothing but a passing dalliance, but he still liked her. Enjoyed how her company filled a fraction of the void Chrissy had left. Maybe because he had let her get attached in some way, he had brought about this danger for her.

It was like he was *numb* . Every passing minute, he felt the sensations he had taken for granted give way to nothingness. He could tell he was touching something, could feel the steering wheel in his hands, but the feeling of the leather was not there. He was numb as he held her again, pulling her out of the Camaro in a secluded part of town, tying her limbs together in an impossible knot and taping over her mouth before setting her in his trunk.

The Shadow led him back home. He prayed Max wasn't there. Laden with bags of ice bought at the gas station, he made his way into the house. There was no sign of anyone else; relief washed over him. His body meandered into the bathroom, stuffing Heather's things into the cabinet under the sink. Hands dumped bag after bag into the bathtub before submerging itself inside.

He could feel the cold. The one thing he hated most about Hawkins that had finally passed was the cold that seeped into his bones. Now, he was forced to endure it again until The Shadow was satisfied.

It felt like hours, sitting in the ice bath, unable to do anything but think about his situation or see if Heather had come to. All the while, the hissing continued, grating in his head until at last The Shadow had decided to move.

It was strange, what control he was given by the thing in him. It let him dress, let him chainsmoke a few Reds and pop on the radio. The Shadow gave him just enough to quiet him, but never enough to run and free the girl in his trunk.

Don't worry. She'll be free soon.

The Shadow had waited long enough, he guessed. Billy felt himself compelled to get up, to walk back to his car and drive off. Cherry Oak Drive was quiet again, devoid of the minimal bustle of Hawkins. The unusual silence in his car didn't help to quell the anxiety building up in him again.

As he opened the trunk, Billy couldn't help but start to plead.

"Not her. She doesn't deserve it. Find someone else."

His body obeyed only what The Shadow wanted. Heather was in his arms again, limp and delicate. It was only after he had descended the stairs into the darkest part of the warehouse basement that she seemed to come to.

He hated the look on her face. The realization that what had happened earlier was just a precursor to some unknown terror. That his body slammed her down to the ground as she struggled. He could only imagine what she thought of him now. Somewhere down the line, she would've come to hate him, but this wasn't how he had ever expected it.

"Don't be afraid," he heard himself say. "It'll be over soon."

Billy continued to yell, every plea to stop bouncing around internally. Something slithered against him, muting his echoing screams even in his head.

"Just stay very still."

Watch.

It seemed to know how to force him to pay attention. There was a jolt through him that would've made him yelp in pain if he had control of his vocal folds. His fingers peeled off the duct tape on Heather's face, offering her up to the thing that lurked in the darkness. The appendage attached itself for Heather's face, muffling her screams as it took hold of her.

The feelings of utter helplessness gave way to resignation.

In time, you will understand the glorious thing you will all be a part

of.

Inside, Billy was no longer screaming.

Chrissy bit at her lower lip, staring hard at the clear plastic of her phone, a lump in her throat.

She hated that she was even considering calling him.

It had been three weeks since she broke up with Billy. A little less than two weeks since her date with Mitch. After their date and a romp at his apartment, both of them had agreed to keep on the side of friends. He had picked up that she wasn't quite ready to move on, despite her claims otherwise.

Not-so-deep down, she hoped Billy would come back into her peripheral. That he would show up again, that she would get to see him without seeking him out. She just wanted a glimpse of him again. Another test to see if her heart wouldn't lurch or speed up at the sight of him.

This was precisely why she had wanted Steve around tonight. Someone who would talk her down, remind her that Billy was a piece of shit who didn't deserve her time. Someone who had weed, since she had long run out. Instead, she was sitting on her bed, sober, fighting the weak part of her that just wanted to hear his voice.

Chrissy slid off her bed and shuffled towards her desk. The pictures of her and Billy had long been torn off the corkboard, squirreled away. She couldn't bear to throw them away just yet. Sifting through her cassette organizer, she pulled out the ones he had lent to her. She eventually grabbed a mixtape he had made, full of music she hadn't particularly liked but listened to when she wanted to annoy Wes. Her gaze lingered a bit too long, indecision clouding her mind until

frustration finally allowed her hand to let go. The tape fell on top of the pile with a clatter that seemed to fill the room.

She seemed to glide to the closet, her mission now in full effect. Shirt after shirt was tossed to the ground, ones he never would miss but always loved seeing her wear. The metal of the clothing hangers clinked against one another as she searched her closet, tossing one more shirt before staring woefully at the white muscle shirt she had taken back in April. All she could remember was his face lighting up, the cocky grin when he told her to keep it. How special she felt.

Fingers slid between the fabric. His cologne still lingered enough to make her heart sink. Her hands grabbed at the shirt, setting it far back in her closet so it would never be seen. She'd find out a way to let go of it someday. The memory it held, even now tainted, was too sweet to get rid of.

She'd find a box for his things, throw in the last of his tapes that were still in her car. Tomorrow, after work, she would find the resolve to go and give him back everything and get back her own stuff. And hopefully, she would stick to her guns and not be lured back in, no matter how much she secretly wanted to be.

3. trouble youth

JULY 2ND.

All he could picture right now was red hair and blue eyes, the slight flinch at his too-wide smile. It brought some relief; Max wasn't as naive as he took her for sometimes. The look she gave him before they left was almost a comfort. How she puffed herself up, a girl made of stone even though he could pinpoint the fear in her eyes. She'd find a way to protect herself. Hopefully she'd do the same for El.

It seemed El could protect herself just fine, though. From the way his whole body bristled and memories that weren't his own flooded his mind, The Shadow had been bested by her before. She'd done something to *anger* it in a way he couldn't fathom.

He angered it too. Lashed out one too many times, tried to regain more control in the hours The Shadow allowed him to take care of himself. The words it hissed at him were far too similar to his father's. The relief he felt at the beginning of this week when Neil and Susan had left for their mini-vacation was gone.

He had traded one monster for another.

Now in the pit of the warehouse, he watched as Heather approached her father. A stoic man. Genial. Far too willing to accept the story The Shadow had concocted about Heather.

Billy couldn't understand why Tom would let him into his home in the first place, charming or not. The Shadow seemed to know how to take bits and pieces of Billy to concoct a more digestible version of himself. A better version, one that could be loved and accepted if he followed the rules, smiled and laughed when required and said all the right things. The more it molded this iteration of him, the less clear it was to Billy who he was anymore.

“You don’t have to do this,” Tom pleaded. “You can stop this.”

Billy’s sight started to blur, eyes watering with tears he thought he’d spent the last of. God, how he wished that were true. He had spent so much time fighting to stop it. Exhaustion hung over him like a looming storm.

“There is no stopping it, Daddy. You’ll see.”

He tried to read Heather’s face. He had felt her touch even through the numbness that consumed him. He wondered if she felt him too, if she was still buried deep below the muck and the shit that had consumed them.

He couldn’t bear thinking about how much she was screaming inside.

Billy bent down, taking the cloth gag from Janet’s mouth. Her pleas to Heather hit deeper than he ever expected. A finger pressed against her lips, silencing her. He was grateful for that. The more she cried, the more he realized this family’s fate lay in his numb hands.

If there was a hell, he would be going straight there.

“Try not to move.”

She really had been worried for Billy that morning he rolled out of bed, hungover beyond belief. Or at least, that's what Max had assumed.

They hadn't been talking much lately. After he finally fessed up that Chrissy broke up with him, Billy was... different. Angry. Combative in a way he hadn't been in months.

During a particularly bad argument, Max had told him Chrissy was the only thing that made him tolerate to be around. In hindsight, it wasn't her best moment. She had seen that glint in his eyes after that,

the one that proceeded a broken skateboard or a shattered Walkman. It seemed to wither, his only response being to tell her to go fuck herself. A door slam later, there was a hole in his own wall and a poster of some centerfold covering it.

They were fractured again. Not in the same way as before, but distant enough that the divide *hurt*. So now, after all El had seen and how incredibly normal he had acted at the Holloway's home, Max was really, *really* worried about Billy.

The gentle, concerned tone of his voice, his smile. It was all wrong. It wasn't the Billy she had seen moping around for the past three weeks. It wasn't even the Billy she had seen at his happiest the past few months. Whoever this was, he was too genial and perfect. Even around Mrs. Wheeler he still had his brashness.

Max sat in bed, wondering if he'd come home tonight. If he did, would she and El be safe? What could they possibly do to subdue him if something went wrong?

With a shaky sigh, she resolved to take it into her own hands.

One room at a time, Max locked every window, then moved to the outside doors. El helped to shove a heavier desk in the basement against the door and the table against the back door. Billy could sleep in his car for all she cared. He said himself he had a blanket for that reason.

A knock came from the front door. El froze, looking at her for explanation. Max set down the comics onto the comforter, glancing back at El in confusion.

"Was someone... coming?" El asked, shifting close enough to touch arms with the redhead.

"No," Max said slowly. A frown spread across her face. "It's late, I don't know who it'd be. Maybe we should ignore it."

The knocking started again, this time a little more urgent. Another pause came, and then a flurry of banging on the front door began.

Max felt her heart shoot up to her throat, gripping El's arm as the other girl moved against her. Whoever was outside knew someone was home.

"Shit," Max said under her breath. She slipped out of bed, walking slowly to the living room. El trailed behind, unsure of what to do. Another barrage of knocks on the front door came, along with a voice she hadn't been expecting.

"Hey, can you open up the fucking door, please?" Chrissy yelled, the sound muffled. "It's pouring out here!"

Max's eyebrows crumpled as her shoulders slumped in relief. *Chrissy?* She thought. *What the hell?*

"Who's that?" El asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Billy's ex-girlfriend," she replied, her voice wrought with confusion.

The locks clicked open, and there was Chrissy in all her glory. Face flushed and makeup somewhat intact despite the storm, arms laden with a cardboard box splotted with rain. Max hadn't expected the relief and solace at seeing Chrissy.

"Christ, Max, did you not hear me or something?" she asked, exasperated. She gave a quick glance to El, who was staring at Chrissy with her inquisitive intensity. "Who's your friend?"

"You remember me telling you about El?"

"*Oh*, her," Chrissy murmured. "Yeah. Totally. Nice to finally meet you, El."

El nodded. "Nice to meet you."

Chrissy stood silently for a few moments, dripping all over the porch and staring at the box. Max raised her eyebrows, giving a short sigh.

"So, what brings you here?" Max asked, cocking her head to the side.

"I, um, I was dropping off Billy's stuff that I still had." Chrissy looked down at the box again. Hazel eyes connected with Max's blue ones,

looking far too hopeful. "Is he home?"

Her heart sank.

"No," Max answered, far too quickly. "We saw him earlier at Heather's house. He isn't back yet."

Any hope in Chrissy's eyes slipped away. Her face went slack, jaw setting as she gripped the sides of the box harder. "He was at Heather's? What the hell was he doing there? What were *you* doing there?"

Shit, Max thought. Maybe bringing up the fact that he was at another girl's house wasn't the best idea.

"Heather wasn't at work, and neither was Billy. We just... were trying to check up on them." Not exactly a lie, but what could Max really tell her? She hoped it would be enough to appease her. "You can leave his stuff here, we'll make sure he gets it. But... I don't think you should come back, Chrissy."

"Why, because he's with Heather now?" she retorted. "Like *that's* gonna last."

"He's not... right," El added. Her face, although deadly serious, still held some fear at the edges of her expression.

Chrissy's attention diverted to the younger brunette, a questioning look on her face. Max swallowed hard.

"What do you mean?"

"When we saw him, he wasn't acting like himself." Max's eyes flitted to the floor before back at Chrissy. "He was too nice. Too happy."

Chrissy scoffed. "He's probably happy he's getting laid again, is all."

"Yeah, but he was having dinner with her parents, Chrissy," Max protested. "He *hates* hanging out with parents. You know that better than anybody."

Chrissy went silent. Max wasn't sure if it was because she was

starting to believe them, or if she thought Billy had moved on too fast to Heather.

"Can I come in?" she finally asked. "I'm soaked, and I really don't wanna drive home in this right now."

Max nodded, stepping aside to let Chrissy in. She really looked a mess in the incandescent light of the living room. Max wondered how long she had stood outside; how long it took to gather the courage to knock on the Hargrove's door.

"I'm just..." Chrissy started before taking a shaky breath. "I'm gonna throw this in his room real quick."

She hated the weirdness of Chrissy's hand on the doorknob to Billy's room. It had never been there in the dozens of times she had let herself in before. Chrissy closed the door behind her, leaving it open just a crack. Max could see her set down the box before climbing onto the unmade bed.

"Is she okay?" asked El. "She looks... really sad."

"She will be," Max replied. "She's just still sad about Billy."

"Did he dump her?"

"Um, no," she said, lips pressing into a line. "She dumped him."

"Then why is she sad about him?"

Max paused. "I don't think she wanted to break up. They, like, really loved each other, you know?"

"Oh." El leaned against Max, stealing a glance into Billy's room. "Did... we make Mike and Lucas that sad? Should we be sad?"

"Nah," Max shrugged, shuffling through the TV guide. "Mike and Lucas need to be taught a lesson. Chrissy's reason is probably way worse than ours. I think Billy messed up really bad."

The tv clicked on, a desperate attempt to fill the silence and awkwardness of the whole situation. El obviously had more

questions, but Max wasn't sure she would be able to answer them. Johnny Carson at least could provide a distraction for both of them. Give Max time to figure out what to do, what to say.

Five minutes passed, then another. El had gone to the kitchen to find a drink and something to snack on. Max took it as a good time to check up on Chrissy, who had remained in Billy's room, silent. Slipping off the couch, she pushed open the door, wincing slightly as it creaked.

There was a pang of sadness that she couldn't seem to suppress. Seeing Chrissy curled up on Billy's bed, head buried in one of his pillows, just made Max realize how much had been taken from her. The peace in her home, as fragile as it was, was gone. Billy, the one person in Hawkins who shared their home's secret, was no longer himself. Chrissy, ever her confidante and mentor, had all but disappeared from the fabric of her life.

Max couldn't help but feel sorry for herself.

"Chrissy?" she asked meekly, leaning against the door frame. "You okay?"

"Yeah, sorry," came the throaty reply; almost like she had been crying. "Didn't mean to get all weird on you and El. I'll head out."

Max took in a deep breath. "Can you stay a little longer? We really don't want to be alone."

And I miss you.

It was a truth that she kept secret. She missed her in the way she missed the ocean and the paletas truck that always chimed its song at the cusp of the afternoon. Like the way she missed the quiet Wednesday evenings watching Family Feud with a heaping plate of pasta and her mother, before the Hargroves came and made everything intense and scary. Chrissy's absence, she decided, was another change Max had to endure thanks to Billy.

She wondered if Chrissy felt the same. Angry and betrayed by the choices of the men in her life; her father, her stepdad, Billy. Her

feelings just collateral damage from their decisions. Max wondered if El felt that way, too. Perhaps, she thought, it was the unfortunate side effect of being a girl and that every other woman was subjected to this too. It didn't make her feel better in the slightest.

Chrissy sat up, pushing her still-damp hair from her face as her eyes connected to Max's. For a second, Max almost regretted asking her to stay. If Billy showed up, she'd just be putting another person in danger. Her selfishness came at someone's safety, not to mention comfort.

"Yeah," came Chrissy's voice, breaking through Max's panicked thoughts. "I'll stay. I could use the company, too."

For a bit, it felt normal. That same calm from her stay at Chrissy's house blanketed her. Chrissy had towed off, wiped off the remainder of her makeup and put on a happier face. Max wasn't sure if it was for her sake or because she was actually feeling better.

They had relocated to Max's room, all three squeezing on her bed. Chrissy listened patiently to Max's gripes about Lucas and Mike. El bluntly asked what 'happy screams' meant, now in the presence of someone who, thanks to Max's own explanation, had experienced them. A fit of giggles later, she managed to give a tame yet rudimentary answer that made Max want to die of embarrassment. With a smirk, Chrissy excused herself to get a glass of water, letting El and Max stew with the mini health lesson she had given.

"Hey, Max?" Chrissy called out from the kitchen. "Why the hell is the back door barricaded?"

Max and El exchanged a panicked look, looking towards the door frame as Chrissy came back into her bedroom. Max had never seen her look so concerned before.

"Are you in trouble? Did something happen?"

"N-No," she sputtered, setting down the comic in her hand. "I mean, maybe. It's a preventive measure."

"Against *what*, Max?" Chrissy's voice was unusually stern. She hated

the hardness of her face; never had it been directed at her.

“Billy,” El said softly, breaking the tense silence.

“Billy,” Chrissy repeated, eyebrows raised.

“I told you, okay?” Max said, her voice breaking slightly. “I told you he’s not right, Chrissy.”

Chrissy strode into the room, dropping onto the bed with a plunk. A hand covered Max’s own, squeezing gently. She couldn’t bring herself to look at the older girl.

“Yeah, and you didn’t really elaborate on that.” Max felt Chrissy shift closer. “I need one of you to start explaining.”

“He’s not right,” El said again. “I saw him and heard Heather screaming. Bad screams. And... and... I found Heather. She was scared and... asked me to help her.”

“Wait, back up,” Chrissy said, closing her eyes. She rubbed at the bridge of her nose. “I’m confused, you *saw* him and Heather when she was screaming? How?”

Max shot El a look, fear welling up inside her. Chrissy was now staring intently at El, eyebrows knitted together.

“You’re not gonna understand,” Max insisted.

“Don’t you dare,” Chrissy shot back. Everything about her voice was wounded. “Don’t you talk to me like I’m stupid. I’ve had it with people talking to me like that.”

“Powers,” El said simply. “I saw them with my powers.”

Chrissy’s face was exactly what Max was afraid of. Doubt, disbelief. Utter confusion.

“Wh—”

“It’s true,” Max chimed in. “El can find people, move stuff with her mind. I didn’t believe it at first either, but it’s real.”

"Can you... show me?" Chrissy shifted closer, her now frizzy hair falling over her shoulders. "Like, can you move the books on the table?"

El gave Max an uneasy look, trying to search for approval in her eyes. Max hesitated. Letting Chrissy know about Billy for her own safety had snowballed; the more she knew, the more entwined with everything going on beneath the quiet facade of Hawkins she became.

Perhaps against her better judgement, Max nodded.

Concentration blanketed over El's features, the books on Max's nightstand slowly rising in the air before plopping in the middle of the three girls. They all sat in silence; Max's eyes had locked themselves on Chrissy.

"Holy shit," she finally said, barely audible. "Holy *shit*."

"So, do you believe us?" Max asked tentatively. "About what El saw? That something's wrong with Billy?"

There was a long pause. Max felt a pit sink further in her stomach. It was a gamble, letting out even a smidge of this information to someone who hadn't experienced it. She had realized slowly that Chrissy knowing could prepare her for whatever came.

"I believe you," she murmured.

"You do?"

"Kind of hard not to now. Maybe I want to because it sounds better than him actually wanting to be with Heather." She gave a sardonic smile. "But I trust you, Max. You know him better than anyone."

I do, don't I?

The realization that Chrissy might be right brought the sting of tears to her eyes. As much as she tried to hide them, the older girl had seen the shift in her demeanor. A swift hug enveloped her, followed by another pair of arms: Eleven's. For the first time in months, she felt a release of tears, all the hurt and fear barreling out in quiet shudders.

“Hey,” came Chrissy’s soothing tone. Fingers swept through Max’s hair. “It’s okay. It’s gonna be okay.”

Max wrapped her arms around the older girl, embracing her as tight as she could. She wanted to believe her. Something about this whole situation made it extremely hard to.

“It’s late,” Chrissy said, glancing at the clock on Max’s nightstand. “If you want me to stay the night, I gotta call the parentals and let them know I’m not coming home.”

“That’d... That’d be nice.” Max wiped at her eyes, feeling El’s hand sweep a few copper strands from her face. “Where would you sleep? We don’t have sleeping bags.”

Chrissy shrugged. “Couch, I guess.”

“—Do you copy? This is a code red. I repeat: This is a code red.” Radio static hit for a split second. *“Max, do you copy? This. Is. A code red.”*

Fingers grasped at the ground, trying to find the walkie talkie amongst the comics and magazines on her floor. Finally grasping it, Max brought it to her mouth, annoyance coating her face. “Shut. Up.”

She clicked off the radio, flipping back over in bed. El had awoken, hair frizzing off her head as she rubbed her eyes in confusion. The renewed silence of the morning was short lived as the phone began to ring.

“You have got to be kidding me,” she grumbled. Max sprung up out of bed, grabbing the phone off the holder. “I’m sleeping, go away!”

“This is Mike, do not hang up,” came the tinny voice over the phone. “Something happened, something bad. Our very *lives* could be at stake.”

A chill went through her body. “What are you talking about?”

“Just come over to my house, we’ll explain everything. *Hurry.* ”

The phone went dead. Max stared at the receiver before setting it back down into the cradle. In her heart, she knew what Mike was so urgent about and the things El had seen were two pieces of a dangerous puzzle.

“What’s going on?” El asked, sitting up fully now.

“Mike,” Max said simply. “He said something bad happened. We need to go.”

She stalked out of her room, heading towards the living room to wake Chrissy. The couches were both empty, bearing no sign that anyone had slept there. Her heart started to thud, until she saw Billy’s door was open.

Pushing it open wider, the sight of Chrissy cocooned in Billy’s comforter brought a wave of mixed emotions. Relief that she hadn’t left or been taken in the night; sadness from the understanding of how deeply Chrissy missed her step-brother. She must have gotten up at some point in the night and found comfort sleeping in there, Max realized.

She hesitated for a moment. Feet padded into the quiet of Billy’s room, stopping at the bed before her hand shook Chrissy’s sleeping form gently. Chrissy let out a small groan, curling up further before turning her head to see Max.

“Can we get a ride?” she asked. “It’s important.”

4. the space between us

JULY 3RD.

The rain had come and gone, leaving only the deepest greens and bright blooms of midsummer. Chrissy wished she could enjoy it; wished she was doing anything else than sitting in her car blatantly ignoring and disobeying Max's words.

You're not a miracle worker, she chastised herself. It's not your job to fix this.

The truth was after her night spent with Max and El, her resolve to leave Billy in the past had completely fallen away. Why wouldn't it? All the memories that lingered there had hit her tenfold. Even been around Max had been enough to make her heart yearn for her place back in his bed, pressed against the cool wall with their limbs entwined in each other's. She missed him and everything that came with him.

What El and Max had told her, what she had seen for herself, only seemed to break that resolve faster. The one constant about Billy was his need to brave the worst things alone. She couldn't in good conscience let him do that again. As much of a bastard as he had been, she still cared deeply for his well being.

There had been dozens of moments Chrissy could have turned back. Even now, sitting outside the house on Old Cherry Street, she had a chance to leave, to listen for once to the warnings given to her.

It was hot; *sweltering*. She'd chosen to wear a sundress that hit mid-calf, short enough to make her regret it as her thighs stuck to the leather of the driver's seat. Finishing her cigarette, she flicked the butt onto the cracked pavement and made her way to the front door. A glimpse of the Camaro only further concerned her, the dent on the passenger door and cracks on the windshield holding a story she

wished she wasn't so curious about.

Her heart threatened to beat straight through her chest as scuffed, once-white sneakers found their resting place on the welcome mat. A sigh blew through her nostrils, tongue clicking in between her teeth.

Stop hesitating. You can do this.

Chrissy rang the doorbell.

The chime of the doorbell made him wince. He'd taken care to make it seem like no one was home, to keep as low of a profile as he could to avoid more people being taken. The Shadow had allowed him a semblance of control again, despite its anger at Billy's confession at the pool.

He had tried to scrub his body clean of the feeling. His hands, raw and red, had almost killed someone. Not just fed it to the thing The Shadow was building, but actually, truly *killed*. The skin that had touched El's throat was still attached to him, a reminder of the pain he continued to cause. He wished he could rip out his voice box, toss away the thing that had said such vile shit to Max. If he made it out of this — *he was quite sure now it wouldn't happen, that The Shadow was right* — she would never look at him the same way again. He would never be able to face himself in the mirror again.

So, as the doorbell rang again, he tensed and walked to the kitchen. Shaky hands poured a glass of water, only a few sips managing to slip down his throat before the glass fell into the sink. As he stared at the shards, whoever was out front began to knock on the door.

He knew that knock. Knew that pattern, the depth and tone, like his own heartbeat. Billy knew opening that door would spell disaster, but that if he ignored it, the knocking would continue. Chrissy always managed to find a way in.

Heavy footsteps made their way to the front door. He waited for a

lull in the pounding on the wood, every muscle in his body tense. A shaky breath filtered through his nose as his hand, raw skin and fingernails bitten to the quick, undid the lock. He turned the doorknob.

She was so... *pretty*. Not that she had ever had a day where Billy hadn't thought she was, but in that dress with her hair loosely pulled back from her face, she looked like heaven. He wanted nothing more than to tell her, to pull her close and take a bit of that heaven for himself to ride out the hell he was in.

"Hi," she breathed, mustering up a tiny smile. It lasted for only a few moments before her eyes raked over him. "Billy, your face. Y-Your arm. What happened?"

"None of your business," he said curtly. "Go home, Chris."

He could have closed the door at any time. Instead, there he stood, fingers gripping the wood as he stared her down. Hoping his harsh attitude would drive her away, that she would take her hopeful eyes and floral sundress far from his door.

"I just... I heard you weren't doing okay. Max said—"

"You saw Max?" he interrupted, eyebrows furrowing. "When?"

Chrissy blinked, mouth opening and closing before she looked down at her feet. "I stayed over Monday night. She was really scared, Billy. She said you weren't being yourself."

His shoulders tensed slightly. So she hadn't seen his sister after the fiasco at the pool. It explained why Chrissy was so bold as to be here. She had no clue what had happened. He swallowed, trying to keep his face as stone-like as possible.

"She's a stupid kid, why are you listening to her?" Billy retorted. Already he could hear the hissing crescendo in his head. "I told you, go home."

The hissing was almost unbearably loud now. The longer he let this go on, the more likely Chrissy would be lost to The Shadow's influence, by his hand. He could see her eyes starting to mist over.

His own eyes diverted as he shifted, moving to close the door. A soft hand grabbed his free one; the strength of Chrissy's grip surprised him. Billy felt his breath hitch as her other hand took his palm, gently pulling it to meet her lips. He swallowed hard, knowing the feeling of her kiss against his palm but unable to feel it fully through the numbness of his entire being.

"I don't want to go home. I don't want to leave you alone."

Her arms enveloped him, an embrace tight enough that he could almost *feel* it. Fingers pulled at the ribbed cotton of his undershirt, palms pressing into the bruises on his back enough to make him wince. He didn't care about that. He had what he had been missing. Billy could tell her a million times how much he had missed her, missed the feeling of her enveloping him, but it would never be enough.

"*It hurts*, Billy," she stammered. "I feel like I can't breathe without you around. I just... I just want to breathe again."

It all seemed to flood in at once, the memories of the past six months.

Her lips against his.

— *she was a fire and he'd do anything to be ash in her hands* —

The first time he had a taste of her, of things to come.

— *he wanted nothing more than to drink her up slowly, drown in her* —

Their time at the lake.

— *the closest thing to an ocean view she could give his homesick heart* —

Quiet mornings that weekend in April.

— *He hadn't imagined mornings like this, someone entwined in his comings and goings* —

His first admittal of the love he felt that threatened to burst through

his chest.

— *a nod against bare skin, the breath he had been holding let out at last*

The hissing stopped.

For the first time in nearly a week, his mind was quiet. No background noise, no unwanted opinions from whatever lurked inside him. All the thoughts were his own, and they all seemed to center around her.

Billy began to cry.

They weren't the desperate, ugly sobs of yesterday at the pool, nor were they quiet tears of anger that hit him in his moments alone. They were fat tears of relief, fear, a sense of loss, all rolled into one another.

"I've got you," Chrissy whispered, voice breaking. "I've got you."

And she did. As Chrissy stepped into the house, his face cradled in her hands, she pulled him against her body as if to protect him. It took everything not to collapse to the floor and take her with him. She was still crying, letting the tears slip down her cheeks in glistening trails.

"I'm sorry," he managed to say. "I'm so, so sorry, Chris."

Billy could see Chrissy's heart breaking all over again.

"Max was right." He paused, a sigh filtering from his lips as he melted into her embrace. "I'm not okay. Nothing is okay right now."

Her hands slipped from his face, one grabbing his raw hand, the other closing the door. She led him to his room, sinking into the

mattress. Billy felt his legs almost give out from under him as he followed suit.

"What's not okay?" she asked softly. "Her and El told me about seeing you at Heather's. That both of you were acting weird."

He winced at the mention of El. "I don't know if you're gonna believe it."

"I saw a girl move books with her mind the other night," Chrissy said wryly, sniffing as she gave a half-hearted smile. "Trust me, I'm pretty open to whatever weird shit you're about to say."

The tone of her voice was almost enough to get a laugh out of him. Billy cracked a smile for the first time in what seemed like ages.

"I missed that smile." She cupped his face again, kissing him so gently and with such purpose he felt he could lose himself in her. "Tell me what happened, Billy. I want to know."

"I got attacked by something and it just... took over me. Locks me inside myself and I just have to watch it do... It keeps making me take people and doing the same to them." He averted his gaze. "It took Heather. And her family. I don't want it to take you too."

"It won't," she said firmly.

He felt tears prick up in the corners of his eyes again. More than anything he wished he could believe her.

"Look," he sighed, "if I'm not acting like me, run. If it tries to hurt you, do what you have to, just get away."

She looked so somber, so crestfallen from his words. If only he could stop being the one to make her feel that way. Billy wondered if The Shadow could hear him, if it was aware of his warning. If it did, it was his punishment to bear.

You hear that, you son of a bitch? Stay the hell away from her.

There was no answer. He exhaled, relieved that the quiet had continued.

Billy grabbed hold of one of her hands, falling back onto the mattress with a wince. Chrissy followed, crawling to her side of the bed. *Her side*. No one could ever take that spot on the mattress again without living in her shadow. Billy rolled over, taking in the halo of chestnut hair around her, the way her mouth parted slightly.

"I love you." Billy's voice was barely above a whisper. "So much."

"I love you, too," she murmured, a wistful smile blooming on her lips.

"I've just been thinking about California," he said quietly. "How much I wanted to take you."

"We can still go."

"I don't know, Chris. I really don't."

She took his face again, pressing a kiss into his lips. Murmurs of *I love you's* volleyed back and forth in the moments their lips parted from each other.

"Tell me what I can do," she said softly, looking into his eyes. "I want to help."

"Don't let go of me," Billy whispered, rubbing his thumb against her forearm. "I don't feel so far away when you touch me."

The way her lips met his, so sweetly, was full of forgiveness and hope. She was his lucidity. For every sharp angle he had, she had her own grit, ready to smooth them down. His future he had seen in her embrace was no longer something he feared.

Fire lit up in his belly, taking another taste of her lips. What had been slow and meaningful had turned desperate and ravenous. Her breath was warm on his cheek, the softest moan slipping out as he rubbed a thumb against her jawline. Hands roamed, one of his finding its way to the soft flesh of her breast.

"Billy," Chrissy murmured, her voice a soft whine.

"Sorry," he offered as the corners of his lips flickered upwards for a

moment. He glided his hand down to the dip in her waist, giving it a small squeeze. "Force of habit."

Her skin against his fingers was but a ghost of a memorized feeling. He could feel her, but just barely. Everything about him was still numb; still grasping for a semblance of sensory fulfillment. Billy didn't have the heart to tell her.

It didn't matter, he realized. He knew her like he knew how to breathe. And, god, having her back was like breathing the freshest air again. He took that air deep in his lungs, pulled Chrissy in impossibly close. Kissed her with such purpose that he hoped it would be enough to save him. It wasn't her burden to save him, but he prayed maybe it was like old fairy tales, that she would save him from this beast. Another kiss, and then another, pressed into her lips, all the while ignoring the salt from tears that just couldn't seem to fully cease.

"I'm sorry," he croaked. "For all of it."

"I know." A hand swept his curls from his face, her finger wrapping itself in a ringlet. "Focus on now. We can figure this all out later, okay?"

The pit in Billy's stomach returned. It was an empty hope for a future where hurt could be mended. But it was something he desperately wished for. For now, he could live in denial, hold on to that empty hope like a lifeline. "I love you."

"Good," she smiled. "I love you too."

Billy curled around Chrissy, grasping at her, taking in whatever he could of her being. The smell of her perfume, the dulled tickle of her hair against his nose. The way her chest rose and fell against his.

"We could get away," he mumbled into her shoulder. "Take what we can, get the hell out of Hawkins. Just you and me."

"I'd like that." Her fingernails massaged his scalp as she sighed a kiss into his forehead. "What brought this on?"

"Just had a lot of time to think this week." He raised his head, eyes taking in her face and the serene expression masking whatever fear

she was feeling. “I realized I don’t wanna miss you anymore.”

“Me either,” Chrissy said, biting at her lower lip. Eyes flitted to her lips before he leaned in, taking another taste of them.

It was quiet after that, nothing but their breathing and the occasional squeak of the mattress as they shifted filling the space. In her embrace, sleep, *true* sleep, started to take him. Billy tried his best to fight it; the thought of waking up alone, or worse, without control was almost unbearable. But wrapped in Chrissy’s arms, there was a sense of safety. There was ease.

He could tell she was starting to drift off as well, her breath deepening and grasp on his face starting to loosen. With the last of his wakeful moments, he slipped her arm around his waist, pressing his forehead against hers. His final looping thought was a prayer for control, for The Shadow to not hurt the girl entwined with him.

As he lost consciousness, the beginning of a hiss fluttered again in the back of his mind.

The space next to her was empty.

It was a slow realization as she came out of sleep. At first, Chrissy thought nothing of it, her mind bathed in the nostalgia of their past. As she felt consciousness fully come back to her, a pit began to lodge itself deep in her stomach. Afternoon sun bathed the room in gold; her eyes slowly moved moved to scan the rest of the room.

He sat on the couch, hands firmly on his knees. Staring directly at her, no emotion on his face. Her chest tightened, every bit of her tense now at the realization that she was now in the presence of whatever Billy had locked inside him earlier. It hated her. She could feel it radiating off him.

If she took her eyes off him, she would be toast. She’d be in trouble either way, but being able to see his movements was better than

nothing. Slowly, she sat up, hair slipping past her shoulders.

Chrissy slipped off the bed. Maybe she could still reach him, still bring him back. He'd fought back hours before, why couldn't he do it again? Hands slipped to cup his face, her forehead nearly touching his.

"Billy?" She asked softly. "Billy, talk to me."

He looked up, face softening as her thumb stroked across his cheek.

"Chris?" he finally asked, voice low.

Chrissy felt a smile slip past the fear, a bit of hope flickering in her. Slowly, Billy stood, breath measured and eyes flitting across her face. She wrapped her arms around his torso, praying for it to be enough.

"I'm still here," she murmured. "I've got you."

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into an embrace. It felt stiffer than before, less like the hundreds of times she had been in his arms. Against all common sense, she ignored it, desperately hoping that he was still fighting, still just barely below the surface.

"Sweet girl." There was a pause. Chrissy felt herself tense again in his arms, the pet name so close and yet all wrong.

This isn't Billy, every part of her screamed. *Get out! Run!*

"He used to called you something like that, didn't he?"

Chrissy pulled away. Billy did nothing, watching her with a dead expression as she tried for the door. Just outside the door frame, so close to freedom, she felt a hand grab a fistful of her hair. Chrissy let out a yelp, taking a few steps back to ease the strain on her head.

"You should have left when he told you to leave."

Chrissy felt her knees start to buckle. She gripped the wood of the frame for dear life.

"How pathetic," came his unsettling deep tones. "He wants to protect

you, despite knowing what will come.”

Chrissy tried to scream, only to have Billy’s hand slap over her mouth. He was dangerously close now, his warm breath hitting the top of her head. Nothing about his touch felt like *him*. She let out a muffled whimper into his hand, more tears sliding down her face only to collect on his fingers.

“In the end, there will be nothing. *You* will be nothing. Keeping you alive is a small mercy that will be meaningless in the end.”

The grip on her hair tightened. She could only wince as she let out a stifled sob.

“But,” he said slowly, “we can make a point. If he wants you alive, we can take you from him all the same.”

With a swift move, his hand left her mouth, pushing hard against her back as he released her hair. Chrissy felt herself hit the floor, the wood letting a sickening echo of a thud. There was a pop from near her elbow, then searing pain rushing through her elbow up her arm. She let out a yelp, crumpling on the floor.

All at once, her hair was in a tight fist behind her again. With a fluid motion, he flipped her over onto her back, ignoring the struggling and slaps against his arms and chest. He was kneeling on top of her now, that dead look on his face as his eyes misted over with fresh terror. She knew in that moment it was him crying, the real Billy, forced to watch her mistakes catch up with her.

Do what you have to, just get away.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, almost inaudible.

It was swift, her knee sweeping upwards between his legs. Billy — *no, the thing that was wearing him like a cheap suit* — let out a yelp of pain, the wind knocked out of him as he collapsed next to her. Taking no time to revel in how well her half-baked plan had worked, Chrissy pulled herself up with the arm of the couch, letting out her own cry of pain as she accidentally straightened her arm.

Making it out of his bedroom, Chrissy slammed the door shut. Her

breaths were loud and rapid, nearly hyperventilating, as she slid the lock shut. She hated that lock, hated the implication of what Neil had thought an outer lock on a bedroom door was needed. Today, it was her saving grace.

So was her last minute decision to leave her car keys out in the living room, dropped somewhere in between the cushions of the sofa. As Chrissy dug into the sofa, she accidentally hit her elbow against the arm. A fresh wave of pain ran down her arm.

A guttural howl came from inside Billy's room. Chrissy jumped, watching as the door rattled on its hinges as he slammed against it. Whatever was inside him was acting akin to a feral animal, yelling wildly as it continued to ram against the wood. The attack on the door paused only for a second before something more solid than flesh smacked against it. The inside of the door started to splinter, and with one final shout, one of Billy's stray weights splintered through. Chrissy shrieked, frozen in fear long enough to see his arm, now wrapped in spidery black veins, shoot out from the hole, trying to find the lock.

Fear let go, giving into adrenaline and flight. Without a second thought, Chrissy flung open the front door, running towards her car.

Fumbling to get the key in the ignition, she shot a glance at the house. He had made it out and was standing at the threshold. Billy didn't move a muscle, just watched her struggle with her keys while a horrid anger sat on his beautiful features. Chrissy looked down, key finally in its slot, and turned over the car.

She sped off with no destination, the desperate need to get as far away as possible at the forefront of her mind. Rows of trees turned to fields, all in summer-y bloom while she felt like winter. Soon, there were no houses, no sign of the familiarity of Hawkins but a couple farms.

She stopped driving a few miles down Highway 18. Instinct to run gave way to unbearable pain radiating up her arm. As gravel crunched under her tires, the Bug coming to a slow stop on the side of the road, Chrissy choked back a sob. Tears plopped onto her left arm as she cradled it with her good arm, rocking and hugging herself

in an attempt to comfort and ease the pain. The leather of her steering wheel pressed into her forehead as a wail finally released from her body.

She wasn't sure she would ever stop screaming.

5. william

The last thing Billy remembered was Max's face.

"Billy, get up, please... please, get up. Billy—"

He remembered her hands on his shoulders, the closest to an embrace they ever had gotten. Voice so soft and afraid; it was the sweetest his name had ever sounded coming from her.

He remembered his apology, garbled by blood.

Then, there was nothing.

There was relief in nothingness. No pain, no sadness. Just a vast emptiness holding him like the ocean. He could float forever in its quiet, lulled by the peace that that it would go on forever.

Despite that temptation of peace, Billy wanted to *live*.

He would take the pain, all the hurt. He wanted life, if just to have a little more time to bask in the banality of it. Smoke one last cigarette at sunrise, feel grass under his feet. Tease Max one more time, feel a real smile spread across his face. Take one more taste of lips he loved. Fall asleep to just one more song.

As he thought of all the things he so desperately wished to have, even one last time, nothingness gave way to *something*.

He felt himself breathe.

Every part of him that had surrendered to finality sparked at once. In that moment, he *knew*; he was still alive, still a part of everything that he had cherished between the hurt and anger.

He saw black, then white. Colors that all meshed together into a dizzying array, vibrant and beautiful.

All he could hear was garbled words, clicks and beeps from machines he couldn't see. Pain began to hit, as did the urge to scream. The noise never came, muted by whatever damage that had been done, whatever mechanism that kept him breathing. Maybe he had just tired of his own voice. In such a hazy state, he couldn't tell anymore.

Nothingness returned, like thread slowly through the eye of a needle. This time, he knew it wasn't the type that swallowed you whole. It was some form of sleep, a way to block out the pain for a little longer.

There was no telling how long it lasted. To be honest, Billy wasn't very concerned with that. In his quieted mind, he found easier sleep, true sleep. It came in short bursts at first, his need for rest fighting against the fear that if he truly drifted off, he would never return to the consciousness he had found. Slowly, the stretches of sleep grew longer. In them, he dreamed.

He dreamt of Starcourt, of fireworks and flickering neon that disrupted his vision. His hands in the maw of the creature that had ruined and abused him. Of the visceral pain, being attacked from the inside only to be attacked again from the outside. How, in that moment, he could right some of the wrongs. That maybe he could do something worthwhile.

He dreamt of Max; of the time that past, dingy February where he had let his guard down enough to make her laugh. How she had cried when he pleaded to her, her attempt to soothe him and the promise of help that never came. Of loose curls and a scowl from the first time they had met.

He dreamt of El. Bleeding, hurting just as bad as he was, but trying nonetheless to connect. Crying out of fear, crying for *him*. How, in a strange, wonderful way, he wasn't alone for those moments they had connected.

He dreamt of Chrissy. Part of him wished he didn't.

Truthfully, he had replayed those memories of her, the moments where his heart would swell, over and over to keep him sane the past few days. He'd lull himself to sleep thinking about her laugh. Those memories no longer could exist on their own; if he thought of one, all he would see after was the fear in her eyes and hear her crying into his hand.

But sometimes, he could hear her so clearly — *I've got you. I love you.* — and feel her hands cupping his face. Deep down he knew if he

asked for it, she would forgive him.

As he dreamt, he asked them for forgiveness. To let him have some peace of mind with the living as he wrestled with the dead.

He wouldn't call it full consciousness. It was more a glimmer of awareness; a comfort that though he couldn't see or interact with it, the world still was going on around him. The whirl and beeps from machines had become a constant, sometimes accompanied by the flipping of papers and crinkle of plastic. Voices so quiet he couldn't process what was being said. After a while, Billy stopped trying so hard to listen.

Unconsciousness took him again.

The first thing he recognized as he came back to the distorted version of awareness was Max's voice.

"— and Mom and Neil will be here soon, I promise." A pause, followed by a few snuffles. "Dr. Owens said talking to you is supposed to help your brain or something. I don't know if it's true. I hope so."

Her tinier hand covered his; he could *feel* her. Billy wished he could respond, wanted with his whole being to tell her that he was there.

"I need you to wake up, Billy," Max's voice continued, breaking with each word. "Please."

I'm trying, Max, he thought, feeling his consciousness starting to fade once more. *I am. I'm just so fucking tired.*

The nothingness fell over him once more.

6. from the ashes

Max couldn't remember much besides screaming.

It wasn't the paramedics that took Billy; it was a group of people in different uniforms, instructed briefly by a man she had never seen but that Will and Mike recognized instantly. They worked fast, made no promises that he would see tomorrow, much less the next hour.

It was one of the only times Max wished adults would lie to her.

There was little time to ask questions. She and the rest of the group had been rushed outside, splintered off to the back of ambulances for care.

Familiar faces slowly emerged from the ruins of Starcourt, surrounded by soldiers. First Murray, then Mrs. Byers. Slowly but surely, Hopper made his way out, coaxed along by the man she had seen before. He looked as if he had survived a war zone.

Watching as El and Will ran to their parents, enveloped in a hug so tight even she could feel it, Max felt a sense of dread. Her mom and Neil were five hours away. At some point in the near future, they would be getting a call in their motel room, bringing the crushing reality that Max had seen down upon them. They would speed back home, her mom crying in the way she did when she was overwhelmed and Neil...

Max sighed. She wasn't sure what his reaction would be. How he would feel. She hoped for some sense of panic, for him to feel sad at the news. Max gripped the ice pack against her cheek harder.

She was thankful, once at the hospital, that Mrs. Byers had come with. She was an adult, after all, able to understand the forms and the questions asked of Max. Her trust in Dr. Owens, the man she had seen flitting around in the aftermath, put the redhead at ease. He was friendly enough, easy to talk to, but she could tell just how scared he was too.

“He’s still in surgery,” Dr. Owens’ voice came, slowly waking Max from her daze. She looked up at him from her seat in the waiting area.

“And?” she said, her mouth dry.

“And they’re patching up what they can. If he makes it through, there’s going to be a few more procedures.” He paused. “Have the staff got in contact with your parents?”

Mrs. Byers nodded. “I spoke with Max’s mother after they gave the news. They’re driving back now.”

“What am I gonna tell them?” Max spoke up, looking hard at her hands. “Besides about the fire. My step-dad is a bloodhound, he can smell a lie a mile away.”

Dr. Owens let out a sigh, crossing his arms in front of him. “We’ve got some time to figure out the details. I’ll brief you once my team puts something together.”

Max nodded, staring down at her scuffed shoes. No matter how alone she felt at the beginning of this nightmare, she was slowly learning people had her back. With a small sigh, she looked back up at Dr. Owens, then at Mrs. Byers.

“Is it okay if I call someone?”

Max had never been so nervous to dial a phone number before.

She couldn’t remember Chrissy’s personal number, so resorting to her family’s phone was just an added source of anxiety. She could feel her hands shaking, ears beating with her pulse. Max closed her eyes, taking in a few deep breaths before tapping in the number.

It rang for what seemed like ages.

“Hello?” came a pleasant voice, albeit tired. Chrissy’s mom.

“Hi Mrs. DiMartino, it’s Max,” Max said, closing her eyes once more. Maybe if she imagined herself more confident, it would come through. “Can I talk to Chrissy? It’s important.”

“Sure, honey, give me a second.”

The silence was unbearable. Max thought of hanging up, of dealing with this tomorrow or after a bit of sleep. She couldn’t do that to Chrissy, though. Not after letting her in to everything.

“Hello?” Chrissy’s voice sounded exhausted.

“Chrissy,” she started, before taking a big breath. The words seemed to stick in her throat. “Um, there was... I mean, something really bad happened. Like, really, really bad. I’m at the hospital and Billy’s in surgery and I’m not sure he’s gonna—”

“What?” The voice on the other end of the line was small, breathless.

Max felt herself start to crumble. She wished she wasn’t, not here in the presence of adults she barely knew. “The thing that was making him act weird. It hurt him and I don’t know if he’s going to be okay.”

There was an agonizing silence.

“You parents aren’t home yet, are they?” Chrissy asked. Max could hear her trying to hold back tears.

“No.”

“Christ, Max.” There was a pause and shifting. “I’ll have my mom drop me off. You shouldn’t be alone.”

“Did something happen to your car?” Max asked.

“No,” she said, a hesitation in her voice. “I can’t drive right now. I broke my arm.”

“Wh—”

"I'll explain when I see, you okay?"

The line went dead.

"Max?"

She was here, breathless and cheeks tinged cherry. Chrissy honestly looked awful. A giant slab of a cast wrapped up her forearm and over her elbow, her hair in disarray. It was about six inches shorter than the last time Max had seen her, bluntly cut and just barely hitting below her jawline.

"Chrissy!" Max stood, grasping the older girl in as comfortable of a hug as she could give. Chrissy hugged back fiercely, almost for dear life. As Max pulled away, she eyed up Chrissy once more.

"You cut your hair," she stated. "Why?"

"Wanted a change," Chrissy said back, smiling wanly.

"How'd you break your arm?"

The smile faded quickly from Chrissy's face. "Can we... Can you tell me how he's doing first? What happened?"

Max really didn't know where to begin. The more she explained — *Halloween of last year, the sauna, the flayed, Starcourt* — the more she felt herself ramble. Chrissy's face slowly drained of color. Perhaps it was all too much for the older girl, but there was no abridged version that would make sense. Everything interconnected, and in her head, it all felt important.

"You can't tell anyone," she warned. "I mean it. Even the doctors taking care of Billy are in on it. All you know is there was a fire, and he helped save us."

"You think anyone would believe me?" Chrissy rolled her eyes. "I

won't say anything, Max."

"Now tell me about your arm."

"What?"

"Your arm," Max repeated. "You keep avoiding the question."

Chrissy winced. "It's... Max, it's a lot to get in to."

"Mom and Neil won't be back for hours. We've got time to kill."

Max's curiosity about the cast slowly gave way to horror. In some way, she felt responsible. She could've called, could've warned Chrissy about what they were *truly* dealing with. At the same time, Max wondered if it would've mattered. Maybe when you loved someone that much, the risk was worth it to help them.

And despite it all, Chrissy was here. Scared out of her mind, she still came to Max's aid and worried about Billy. She hoped Billy would wake up, if only to see how much he was loved.

"They won't say when they'll let us see him," Max said quietly, fiddling with her watch. "He's in surgery still, I think."

"Where's Lucas?" Chrissy asked, pushing a few strands of hair from her face.

"Home," Max said simply. "He was there too, at the mall. Him and his sister both got taken home, his mom wouldn't let him come to the hospital with me."

"It's nice he wanted to come. He seems like a good kid." This time, Chrissy's smile was genuine, even if it only lasted a few moment. "And he came up with the fireworks thing? You've got a keeper."

Max felt herself beam. "Don't tell him that. It'd go to his head."

Hours wore on, the wait for her parents to arrive filling both of them with agitation, despite the small talk. At one point, Max found herself dozing off against Chrissy. The older girl seemed to barely hold on to wakefulness too. She wondered how well she had slept the night

before, if at all.

Their descent into sleep was interrupted by a soft clearing of a man's throat. Max's eyes shot open, realizing it was Dr. Owens. Chrissy stirred, rubbing at her face with her good hand.

"Surgery went well. He's settled into his room," Dr. Owens said, eyeing up the two of them. "You can visit for a few minutes if you'd like, but it's got to be quick so we don't disrupt the fine nurses here. They'll let your folks come in once they arrive."

Max turned to Chrissy, a hopeful smile on her face. "You're coming, right?"

Chrissy's face was conflicted, guilt and the start of tears glossing her eyes. Max's stomach dropped. The hesitation only made things that much worse.

"You go," Chrissy said. "I don't... I'm not ready, Max."

"Chrissy," Max pleaded, "what if he doesn't... I mean, what if he—"

"I just need time, Max. Please." The older girl wrapped her arm around Max, pulling her into a hug. "I'll go when I can."

Max slipped out of her embrace. She knew she couldn't fault Chrissy for the way she felt, the fear that was stopping her, but disappointment welled up in her heart. Despite everything that had happened, Chrissy was here. It should have been enough. As Dr. Owens ushered her towards Billy's room in the ICU, she couldn't help but feel even more alone than before Chrissy had shown up.

The moment Max stepped into the room, she hated it.

She hated seeing the sterility of it all. Windows from the hallway that provided no privacy unless a thin curtain was pulled across them, chairs that made sitting on the floor sound more comfortable than the cushions on them. Large machines, all hooked up in various ways to the unconscious body of her brother.

For the first time in days, she saw his face clearly. How dark the bags under his eyes were, the hollows of his cheeks more prominent than

normal. A sob caught in her throat, choking out and echoing in the near emptiness of the room. She took his hand, giving it a small squeeze as her other hand covered the top of blotchy skin.

"I'm here, Billy," Max whispered. "And Mom and Neil will be here soon, I promise."

She paused, sniffing as tears started to blur her vision. "Dr. Owens said talking to you is supposed to help your brain or something. I don't know if it's true. I hope so."

Even though she knew there would be no response, she held out hope he could hear her. Maybe even squeeze her hand. Any sign that he was fighting to still be with them.

"I need you to wake up, Billy. Please."

I can't deal with this alone.

Every day afterwards was torture.

Her head hurt. Her arm hurt. She hadn't slept more than a few hours in the few days since her foolish decision to seek out Billy. Everything about her was in disarray, her thoughts a muddled mess.

Chrissy knew she was playing with fire. Billy's condition could change at any moment, he could be gone before she had the chance to see him alive. Her mother had asked every day since she had first gone to the hospital if she wanted a ride, when she would be going. There was hesitation, despite the need to see him. Fear that whatever had taken him over was still inside, waiting for her.

Four days later, she could no longer put it off. Susan had been gracious enough to pick her up and accompany her.

Chrissy always hated how people described other people in hospitals. How they looked small surrounded by machines, the pallid tone of

their skin. It felt unrealistic to her.

Seeing Billy in the ICU, she understood it even less. He didn't look small; someone like Billy Hargrove took up space and demanded attention even while unconscious. What he did look was unreachable, unable to be touched through the wires and tubes. It made her feel the distance between them, how even now she wanted to grab him close but had a barrier.

All she could think while she sat herself down next to the hospital bed was how minute in comparison her pain was. She was awake, had an understanding of what had happened to Billy. He didn't have the luxury of either thing.

"How long do they think he's going to be like this?" she asked quietly.

"Hopefully not long," Susan answered from the opposite side of the room. She was busying herself with fixing the bouquet of flowers that Chrissy's mother had sent the day before. "Dr. Owens said the longer he stays in a coma, the less likely he'll come out. We just have to hope it'll only last a little longer."

Chrissy went silent. Eyes searched his face, hoping for some semblance of consciousness to come. There was nothing but the slow rise and fall of his chest.

"Your haircut looks nice on you," Susan said, scattering Chrissy's thoughts once more. "It looks very grown up."

"Thank you."

She didn't feel very grown up. If anything, she felt more dependent on the adults around her than ever to provide guidance and security. She had let fear turn her into someone she didn't recognize, fearful and withdrawn. The outside might as well match how different the inside felt.

"He'll wake up, Chrissy." Susan paused, walking up to the hospital bed to take a look at her step-son. "He made it through the worst part."

A hand pushed a few of his curls from his face. Chrissy realized she had never seen Susan speak about him in such a familiar way, much less touch him. She wondered, if Billy woke, if the softness would shrivel up into the walled up politeness again. She hoped, for his sake, it would not.

"I'm going to grab a coffee," she said, giving a thin smile. "Do you want something, sweetie?"

Chrissy shook her head. "I'll be okay, thanks."

To her surprise, she felt calm being alone with Billy. Not the same calm as before, the wash of peace over her mile-a-minute brain, but a lack of fear. It was a relief. She knew he would find it a relief, too.

"It's not fair," she whispered, a wistful smile coming to her face. "You still look cute even with the tubes and shit all over. How's anyone supposed to compete with that, Billy?"

All she wanted to hear back was a deep chuckle. Instead, beeps; the hum of a machine of which the function she had no clue. Scooting closer, she slipped her hand into his, rubbing her thumb against the cracked skin.

"I love you."

Perhaps that love was why the past few days had been even more turbulent. The thought she had been ruminating on in the wee hours of sleepless nights had sounded more and more enticing. She wanted to leave. Get out of Hawkins, get out of Indiana. Move in with her father and have a life away from all the bad memories.

Now, sitting here with Billy, that love broke her heart all over again. Abandoning him when he was unable to even breathe by himself awashed her with a guilt she had never thought possible.

She deserved a fresh start. So did he. If she stayed, the past would never fully allow either of them to find peace. Chrissy stood, the chair squeaking across the linoleum floor as it pushed slightly back. Lips pressed against his forehead, her hand sweeping against his tanned face.

"I love you so, so much," she whispered. "Please don't hate me for this."

What was once a room with a semblance of organization to it was now an ever evolving chaos. Boxes, some filled, others barely touched, lined the perimeter. Piles of knick knacks and sentimentalities littered the floor, the desk, any possible space available. In the middle of it all was Chrissy, growing increasingly frustrated at how difficult sorting and packing a room with only one good arm proved to be.

Muttering curses under her breath as she struggled to get the flaps to a box filled with records to lay flat, she failed to notice someone padding softly into the room.

"What's up with the boxes, DiMartino?"

Chrissy set her jaw, eyes rolling at the sound of Steve Harrington's voice. *Of-fucking-course he would show his face now.*

She glanced Steve's way before giving up on the cardboard flaps. She was hoping that she'd have more time to figure out how to break the news to everyone. After finally admitting to her parents that she wanted out, it had been too nerve-wracking to face the crying and questioning again.

"Just getting rid of some stuff," she lied. She held up a 45 record, looking back at him. "You want this? It's 'Turning Japanese'. You like The Vapors, right?"

"Bullshit," Steve said. "Your mom said you're leaving."

Chrissy let out a little sigh. "She really can't keep her mouth shut, can she?"

"So it's true?" he asked. "You're gonna just go to wherever you're moving and that's it? What about everyone here, Chrissy? We need

you."

"Yeah, and where were you, Steve?" she snapped. "I needed you too the last week. Who was I gonna talk to about all this shit, Annette?"

"I had a *concussion*, Chris, what did you want me to do?!"

"Not whatever you were doing at Starcourt!" Her voice was louder than she had wanted, so impassioned it took a mind of it's own. "Billy is barely alive, you think I want to lose you? You think I want to leave Max? My family?"

"Then don't!" he argued back, throwing up his hands. "We'll be here for you too, Chris. You're running away and it's not gonna help in the long run."

"I'm not running away," she shot back.

"It sure as hell looks like it."

The record hit her floor, a soft crack coming from inside the paper sleeve. Steve's eyes widened as Chrissy stepped closer, face thundering. She couldn't remember the last time he had gotten a rise out of her like this. On a different day, in a different timeline where none of the stress of the past few weeks and her upcoming move existed, she may have kept her cool.

"You think I'm going to stay in Hawkins forever?" Chrissy fumed. "If I don't get out now, when am I gonna get out? If you're invested in whatever the *hell* keeps happening, fine, but it's not my fight. I have a broken arm and that's enough for me."

"Yeah, your mom left out that part," Steve retorted, glancing down at her cast. "What happened?"

"I got drunk and fell at a party," she said flatly. "What do you think? I made a stupid mistake. I went to see Billy right before the 4th. I broke my arm. The end."

Steve went silent for a few seconds. With a slow exhale, he passed her to stand at her bed, taking the box and folding the flaps to stay closed. A gesture of goodwill, she supposed.

"Sorry," he finally said. "I just... I don't want you to leave. But I don't want you to be miserable here either."

Silence filled the room as Chrissy stood, watching him straighten the stack of records strewn on her bed. In the moment, she felt like she was about to cry, but the tears seemed to have dried up days ago. She wanted to be done crying.

"It's not like I'm falling off the face of the earth, Stevie," she said quietly. "I'm just going to my dad's. We can still talk, you know?"

"Yeah, yeah." Steve flashed a grin at the use of his nickname. "I'm sure you'll fork over the money to call long distance."

"I was thinking you'd be the one doing that," she teased, a smile lighting up her face. "Y'know, since you're loaded."

"Uh, no. I'm broke. My *parents* are loaded," he corrected. His cheeks puffed as he blew out a long breath, trying to find some clarity in her face. Chrissy realized then just how tired he looked. "We'll figure it out, Chris. No way am I letting you worm your way out of talking to me."

He pulled her into a side hug, giving a soft kiss on her forehead. Her arm wrapped around his waist as she let out a small sigh, looking at the pile of crap on her bed.

"So, uh," Steve cleared his throat, "do you want help? Seems like a lot to do with just one arm."

Chrissy pulled away, giving a small nod. "That'd be cool."

She had decided to walk to the Hargrove's house.

It wasn't necessarily a long walk, maybe twenty minutes tops. Chrissy had tired of being shuttled around again by her parents after the short month of freedom with her own car. She missed being alone,

wandering places without a care. She also missed being able to smoke in the car, something she was now scolded about.

She set out with a full pack of Reds, a few trinkets, and a letter. By the time she arrived, she was down three cigarettes and her nerves were still at an all-time high.

Chrissy couldn't pinpoint the thing that made her want to turn away most. The still-open wound of July 3rd, the thought of potentially having to talk to Neil, or the news she was about to impart on Max. All three made her stomach turn.

It did another flip as the doorbell chimed out. Her last chance to turn around had been squandered; it was time to face what was ahead of her.

Susan answered the door.

"Chrissy," she said pleasantly, obviously surprised to see her. "What do we owe the pleasure?"

"I, um." Chrissy looked down at her feet, steeling herself before looking back up at Susan. "I wanted to talk to Max. She's home, right?"

Susan nodded. "You're lucky you caught her at home. If she's not here, she's at the hospital. I'll let her know you're here. Come in."

The first thing she noticed as she stepped into the house, was the lack of a door on Billy's room. It felt off, having his little sanctuary exposed to the rest of the world like that. She wondered what explanation was given for the massive hole and splinters of wood strewn around the living room. Perhaps it was better not to ask.

Her thoughts were thankfully interrupted by her name on Max's lips.

"Chrissy? What's up?"

She felt her stomach turn to cement, sinking further down her body. Regardless, she put on a smile, hoping it'd be enough to steady her resolve. "Hey. I just wanted to come by and talk."

“Okay,” Max said slowly, giving her a doubtful look. “I’m doing okay, if that’s what you were wondering.”

“Good,” Chrissy said back, the response feeling hollow. “Look, um, could we go in your room or something? It’s kind of an ‘alone’ talk.”

Max gave her a hard look, but nodded before turning and ambling towards her bedroom. Chrissy followed suit, her heartbeat thudding faster than she thought possible.

It was a relief to see Max’s room unchanged by the events of early July. It was something she could at least hold on to, the constancy of her chosen decor and keepsakes. Chrissy felt her stomach lurch again as the realization that it may be the last time she saw Max’s room this way hit.

“So,” Max started, plopping down on her bed, “what’s so important you had to come over to talk? Am I in trouble or something?”

Chrissy crawled onto the bed next to her, legs tucked under her as her purse plopped in the empty space beside them. “What? Why you would be in trouble?”

Max shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Well, you’re not,” Chrissy assured. She blew out a sigh through her nose, trying to look anywhere but at Max’s face before she had gathered the courage to drop the bomb on her. “I’m moving, Max. I wanted to tell you in person.”

Ginger hair whipped around as she gave the most hurt, almost *angry* look Chrissy had seen on the younger girl. She’d seen her glare daggers at Billy before, but it was never anything like this. It made her feel small.

“You’re *what*? ”

“I’m gonna go live with my dad in Florida.” Every word felt like sand in her mouth. “I’m leaving in two weeks.”

“You can’t leave,” Max said, voice hard despite the cracks. “I can’t be alone, Chrissy.”

"You won't be alone," she protested, leaning forward on the bed. "You have your friends and—"

"You want to know what they did? Nothing. Not one of them tried to help him except El. They stood by and let him get hurt or they tried to hurt him themselves." Max crumpled on the bed, hands in tight fists. "You're the only one who cares, Chrissy. They only ask how I'm doing, not about Billy, who's in a coma and could never come out."

The revelation nearly strangled her.

"Max, I can't stay," she finally whispered. "I-I just want to start fresh, okay?"

"Maybe I want to leave too," Max shot back. "But I have to stay because I don't get a choice."

Chrissy sat back. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, letting it out quietly as she looked at the flowery pattern of Max's comforter.

"Are you mad at me?" Chrissy finally asked.

"Yes."

"...How long are you gonna be mad at me?"

"I don't know," Max grumbled back. "Maybe a few months. Maybe forever. I haven't decided yet."

That seemed like a better answer than just plain 'forever'. Chrissy felt her shoulders relax, focusing on pulling the things tossed in her purse. The rainbow belt with the butterfly clasp and the lavender lace shirt she had seen Max eyeing up in her closet plopped down between them, along with a few unused bottles of nail polish. Max glanced down at the pile of stuff, giving Chrissy a questioning look as her face softened a little.

"A peace offering," she explained. "I'd rather you have them, y'know?"

Max took the belt in her hands, hair draping over and obscuring her face as a thumb ran across the butterfly clasp. "You didn't have to."

"I wanted too," Chrissy shrugged. She grabbed the lace shirt, holding it up as she tried to catch Max's eye. It seemed to work. "Do *not* let Neil see you wear this. You want to wear it, stick it in your bag and, like, change once you're out of the house."

That made the younger girl crack a smile. She took the shirt, inspecting it. "Thanks for the tip."

Quiet settled between the two of them, less charged with the negativity that had bloomed from her confession.

"I'm gonna get a job as a flight attendant," she said. "And I'm gonna send you all the postcards that I promised."

"I know."

"And I'll write to you." Chrissy put a hand on Max's knee. "Max, please don't be mad at me. I really need to do this or I'm gonna lose my mind."

"What about Billy?" she asked, turning to look at Chrissy.

It almost knocked the wind out of her, the sorrow on Max's face. That was where it hurt the worst, wasn't it? That the shared work of helping him adjust to whatever new life was ahead of him once he awoke was now shifted entirely on Max. That he would be devastated once he realized, despite every 'I love you', that she had begun her new life without waiting for him. That no matter what explanation she gave, he might never understand or forgive her.

Chrissy's hand flinched, gripping Max's knee a little harder before digging back into her purse. In her hand, a letter with Billy's name on the envelope.

"Give this to him if I'm not here when he wakes up," she instructed, voice cracking slightly. "I'll visit him before I go. I just need this to be someplace safe."

Max looked down at the envelope and Chrissy's bubbly handwriting, seemingly absorbing the moment and the finality of it all.

"I'll make sure he gets it," she said softly.

Chrissy couldn't help but smother the redhead in the tightest hug she could muster. Her whole body relaxed into Max's as she embraced her back, the muffled beginnings of a sob hitting against her chest.

"We have two weeks, Max," Chrissy soothed, her own voice now wavering as fresh tears stung at her eyes. "I promise, whenever you want, we can visit before I go."

"It's not long enough," she sniffled, gripping onto Chrissy tighter.

"I know," Chrissy croaked. "I'm sorry."

7. long gone

Nothingness gave way to *everything* .

With true consciousness came the realization of pain. His eyelids felt heavy, slow to open as if to say ‘No, stay in painless sleep!’, but with effort, Billy finally unlaced long lashes.

He was met not with the familiar poster covered walls of his room, but with pale walls decorated with outdated wallpaper trimmings. A machine whirred quietly next to him, a stand with an IV accompanying it. Billy stared blankly at the tube that snaked into his arm, still unsure of what to think.

While he slept, it seemed he had drifted far from the events of July. It seemed to mix and distort with his dreams, the occurrences too strange against the serene dreams of the people who came and went in his mind. The feeling of being free, only to be dealt the searing pain of being ripped apart bit by bit by a vengeful being that had forced him to commit sins he’d never be cleansed of.

Panic washed over him. Was he *truly* free? He couldn’t feel much still, but by the multitudes of gauze dressing around his torso and the discomfort from the breathing tube down his throat suggested whatever pain medication he was being given was the cause of his continued numbness.

Soon, he was swarmed by doctors and nurses, telling him to stay still, asking him to wiggle fingers and toes. Hours melted together, tests and familiar faces from the hospital staff the only thing that showed the passage of time.

Eventually, his family arrived.

He had never seen Susan cry like she did when she saw his eyes were open and aware. Nor had he ever seen his father look so lost. He liked Max’s response best; a smile, tearful, but so damn happy to see him awake.

They took turns speaking to him, telling him what he had missed. Some things he understood, others he was too hopped up on medication to be fully aware of what was being said.

Apparently several weeks had come and gone since he last had been awake. The Camaro was totalled, but Neil had called a favor to a buddy at the one auto shop in town to see if it was salvageable. Susan had cut her hours to make sure she and Max could go to the hospital at a moment's notice. Max had taped Live Aid so that he could watch it when he was well enough.

He had never been so grateful to be touched before. Susan brushed his hair from his face, rubbing the sleep from the corners of his eyes. Max held his hand, beaming when he managed to squeeze it back.

Neil kept his distance. Billy was grateful for that, too.

And then one day, Chrissy came.

It was unfortunately one of his worse days, barely aware of his surroundings due to the pain medication. But he knew she was there. Felt her skin under his calloused fingertips, heard her call his name and her bitten back sobs.

Why're you crying, pretty girl? He wanted to ask. *I look like shit, sure, but I'm here.*

His comprehension of her words came in and out. How she hoped he liked her haircut, which he did. That Caitlin missed him at the pool. Something about Florida. Something about Russians. How she has sat with Max after the incident at Starcourt.

Billy did what he could, squeezed her hand and fought sleep just to get a few more seconds of her face. She looked so tired. He wished she could crawl in bed and drift off to sleep with him.

Days filtered by, every hour punctuated by doctors and nurses. One man in particular, Dr. Owens, had spent a considerable amount of time with him. He wasn't a medical doctor, per se, but he was able to explain what little he could of the monster, what it had done to him. How *lucky* he was to be awake.

What Dr. Owens couldn't explain, Max made up for. How it came to be in this world, how something similar had happened last year to her friend Will. How she had stolen his car that day in November after his brutal fight with Steve. (He felt a little sorry for beating Steve's face in with this new information, but only a little.) The purpose of trapping him in the sauna. Who Eleven was, how she knew about Billy's mother. Every last detail, all so dizzying that he could barely keep up.

When his arms finally were strong enough, they gave him a dry erase board.

"How're we doing today, Billy?" Dr. Owens asked one morning.

He scribbled down his answer.

FUCKING PEACHY.

It got a laugh out of Dr. Owens. That made him feel good, that his sense of humor wasn't lost on at least one of the white coats.

Max seemed to come by more than their parents. She had the most time, he supposed, and bus fare wasn't that expensive. She would talk, he would listen and scribble down questions and short answers. Eventually, he found the courage to ask:

IS CHRISSY OKAY?

"She's doing alright," Max said, giving a half-hearted smile. "I don't know if you remember, but she came to visit you right after you woke up. You were kind of out of it."

Billy let out a huff, erasing his question to ask another.

TELL HER 2 VISIT? WANT 2 SEE HER.

Max's face fell. Billy felt his screw into a questioning look.

"She isn't here anymore, Billy," she finally confessed. "She moved in with her dad."

He wished he was unconscious again. Or that he could scream

without blowing out his lung. Anything to relieve the sinking in his heart, the feeling that he had awoken to a world where Chrissy wasn't there waiting to be by his side. That he had been left behind again, that his love wasn't enough to keep someone from leaving.

Max rifled through her messenger bag, pulling out a slightly crumpled envelope. She pulled the paper from the envelope and handed it to him gingerly, a woeful look on her face. "She told me to give you. I didn't mean to wait, you just weren't... all there yet."

Billy shot her an annoyed glare, deciding to focus on the page in front of him. It was familiar bubbly handwriting, like so many notes he had squirrelled away in a box in his room.

7/10/1985

Dear Billy,

If you're reading this letter, it means you woke up. I can't tell you how happy I am that you did. You deserve to be awake and to have a second chance at things.

If you woke up, you also now know I'm gone. Max told me everything and I'm sure she'll explain it all to you too. What happened this summer was horrible. I want to forget it, but I know it's not possible. The best thing I could do was get away. I'm in Florida with my dad by now. I don't think I'm coming back to Hawkins.

I need you to know I didn't leave because of you. What happened that day wasn't your fault. It wasn't you that hurt me. Any time I think about it, I just think about lying in bed with you instead. Everything you said to me. It makes it easier. I hope you think of that instead, too.

I wish we had the chance to go to Cali. I still want to go. Maybe one day. I'm hoping once my arm heals I can apply with one of the airlines in Tallahassee. Maybe I'll end up in Cali then?

I am really glad I broke my left arm and not my right, though. You wouldn't be getting a letter if I did. Kidding. I probably would've wrote one anyway. It just would've been hard to read. Casts suck, by the way. I'm going to have a weird tan now and it itches SO bad. You should see me shower, I look like a total dweeb wrapped in plastic wrap.

I feel bad bitching about a cast with you lying in a hospital. I did visit you, by the way. I didn't talk much because I didn't know what to say, but I held your hand and gave you a kiss. Part of me wanted to climb in bed with you. I was still scared to see you when I went. I knew you needed me, though. I'm glad I went, even if it was hard seeing you like that. I wrote this letter a few weeks before I left, so maybe you woke up before then. I hope so. I wanted to tell you in person.

I really hope you heal up fast. I bet you're going nuts in the hospital right now! You can't sit still for dick, so hopefully you'll be up and walking soon. BE NICE TO YOUR NURSES. They worked really hard while I was there.

I need to wrap this up before I ramble more. Everyone always says I talk too much. This isn't a goodbye, though. I'd like to hear from you, you know? I always liked getting notes from you during school. They were cute. My dad's address is at the bottom. I promise I'll write back if you do.

Love you.

Chrissy

"Billy? You okay?"

It was then he realized tears were tracing the contour of his face. He thought he had cried the last of them ages ago. It seemed they had only dove back into their foxhole, waiting to ambush him when he least expected it.

Fuck, he thought. *I'm crying in front of Max like a fucking pussy.*

"What'd she say?" Max asked, leaning over to take the letter. Billy

jerked it away, sliding it under his blanket. Taking the white board, he scribbled down another message.

NONE OF YOUR BEESWAX. PRIVATE.

Max's eyes narrowed as she sat back down in her chair in a huff. "I held on to that thing for like, a month and didn't look. Tell me what she said!"

SAID IT'S NOT MY FAULT + TO BE NICE TO NURSES.

"Why were you acting like she wrote you a dirty letter, then?" she huffed, crossing her arms.

WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME I BROKE HER ARM?

The redhead sat silently, unable to look at him for a few moments. "Because she's right. It wasn't you that did that."

Billy could help but silently fume. It didn't matter; it was his hands that pushed her, his mind that had been infected by The Shadow. His lack of fight that allowed it to take hold long enough to hurt her.

YOU'RE FULL OF SHIT, MAX.

8/18/1985

Chrissy,

I read the letter you left a million times. I wish I could've answered sooner. Things have been all over the place since I woke up. The first few days were terrible. I took a swing at a doctor one time when they woke me up for a blood draw. Turns out, he's a huge asshole anyway so I don't feel as bad. And yes, Jesus, I'm being nice to the nurses.

I remember you visiting. You had short hair and it looked so good on you. I wish I could've told you then. I still have a breathing tube, so

it's been hell not being able to talk. I can write now, obviously, so we could've talked then. I wish you had stuck around.

I didn't know you broke your arm. Max really didn't talk about it much when she explained everything. All I remember is that you fell.

I miss you, Chris. I think about you a lot. All the time, actually. I hope you know what I said (the real me, not that shadow thing) was true. I really wish this summer went differently. All of it, not just what landed me in the hospital. You deserved so much better. I've had a lot of time to think about it now, and I really can't tell you how sorry I am for hurting you.

The fact that you still want to talk to me keeps me going on really bad days.

Love you too.

Billy

9/3/1985

Dear Billy,

How's everything healing up? My cast came off, so I can drive again! Lisa can stop bitching now about having to drive me everywhere. I shouldn't be too mad at her, I guess. She's getting me a job at her salon as a receptionist.

I barely know anyone here. I guess I didn't really think about how lonely it was gonna be. The only person I see regularly besides Dad and Lisa is the guy at the gas station by our house. At least he's cute. (Not as cute as you though.)

Sometimes I don't think it's fair how much I think about you. I wonder if I made a mistake moving here. It's a choice I made for me, though. I think I should see it through for a while. I want to be a better person and I think being a new place will help me become one.

I don't think there would be a time I wouldn't want to talk to you, Billy. Even after we broke up, I still wanted to. Please keep going,

even on those bad days. I don't know when, but I'll see you again. I promise. I don't think I could live with myself if I never saw you again.

Love you,

Chrissy

Slowly, things got better.

The best day was when the breathing tube was finally removed. The freedom to speak again, even if at first it was hoarse and barely understandable, was a godsend. The fact that his lung had healed enough to allow him to do so was enough cause for celebration itself. That meant the rest of him was slowly healing under the staples and stitches. Maybe one day, he would feel whole again, instead of a sack of skin with parts jostled around and missing.

The worst day was when Dr. Owens left. He liked Dr. Owens. No nonsense, didn't bullshit him, but went out of his way to make him laugh during his visits. Most of all, he liked how unlike his father Owens was. Neil and Dr. Owens had butted heads when one was unlucky enough to see the other throughout his weeks in the ICU. all the top secret bullshit meant everyone was on edge and doing their best to keep the story straight.

But Dr. Owens left, as he had to. In his stead was a stuffy doctor who asked the same small talk questions every two hours. There was a new addition to the team; a psychologist who had been briefed on what had happened. Dr. Owens had fought Neil long and hard on that one.

"It was an extremely traumatic experience," he had said, no room for debate in his words. "You want your son to end up like those poor sons of bitches back from Vietnam? You want him to blow his brains out after all the work we put in to make sure he lived?"

That had shut Neil up pretty quick. It seemed to have hit a nerve

Billy had never seen exposed before.

9/22/1985

Chrissy,

Ready for some big news? I'm officially free from the hospital today. I miss my bed so fucking much. I miss wearing real clothes. So fucking sick of sweatpants and hospital robes.

Everything's healing up fine, but I still have to use forearm crutches to get around. I look stupid but I'm not in that shitty wheelchair anymore.

The scars are going to be insane. Don't quite know yet how I feel about that. It'd be better if I had a better cover up story for how I got them than the fire. You're a good liar, maybe you should make one up for me.

Max found out we're still writing each other. She wanted me to ask you something about clothes but I told her to write her own stupid letter. I gave her your address a while ago, so she has no reason to bug me. Didn't think she'd miss you as much as she does, though. Sometimes you come up when we talk and it gets weird.

I'm glad you're settling in, even if it's lonely. I know how it feels. At least you're kind of familiar with the area already. It's cool that Lisa's got a job lined up for you. I'm glad the cast is off, too. I'm a little jealous you're driving again. I hate being driven around again. I feel like a fucking child.

I'll do my best to figure out how to visit when I'm not hobbling around on crutches. I still owe you a surfing lesson.

Love,

Billy

He didn't hate the psychologist. She was nosy — *it was her job to be, after all* — but let him talk at his own pace. First about July 4th. Then about Max. Chrissy. His dad. His mom. His fear of being

abandoned again, especially now that he was damaged goods. How fucking mad at himself he was for being used. Heather, the guilt he felt knowing she wasn't around anymore.

How, if he hadn't cheated on Chrissy, he might have avoided all of this.

For weeks, she came to his room. Once released from the hospital, he had Susan drive him the half hour to her office. Neil would pretend not to hear him if he asked.

Most days, he would keep to himself, stay in his room. Laying in bed, blasting whatever music was loudest and closest in his headphones was better than hobbling past his family on his forearm crutches. Certainly better than getting pitying looks or, in Neil's case, being ignored entirely.

Sometimes, though, being around them was necessary. It was better than being consumed with the overwhelming loneliness of his unique situation. Better than sitting and wishing he could have a cigarette or pack a bowl, all of which had been confiscated by Max until further notice. *Definitely* better than ruminating on the next letter he'd get; what it would say. If he would get a letter at all.

"So, you just talk to her?" Max had asked one night while folding laundry. Billy was perched on the sofa, half watching Cheers as he helped fold his things.

"Basically."

"Neil says it's a waste of money."

"He's not even paying for it, the government is," Billy retorted. "*You* should go to a shrink, Max. You're probably more fucked up at this point than I am."

"You take that back," she said, tossing a sock at his head. "You're the one with the head problems in the family."

"Your diary says otherwise," he teased.

She gasped. "You *didn't*."

“Since when did you become a pervert?” Billy asked as a shit-eating grin spread across his face. “With the way you write about Sinclair, you should become one of those dirty romance writers.”

“You are so fucking *gross!*” she shrieked. Another sock hit him in the face.

“Hey! Language!” came Susan’s voice from the kitchen.

“*MO-OM!* Billy’s been reading my diary!”

He couldn’t help but cackle as Max pelted him with clothes. The last time he had laughed that hard seemed so long ago. Even though Max was obviously pissed at him, he could still see a glimmer of relief at his joy.

“Stay out of my room, you weirdo,” she finally said, shooting him a halfhearted glare. “Just because I’m in school and you’re bored doesn’t give you the right to snoop.”

“I was looking for my stash. Your diary just happened to be in my path,” he said casually. “Not my fault you don’t know how to hide shit properly.”

“Not like you’re great at hiding things either.”

He narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

She set down the shirt she was working on. “You really think it gets awkward when we talk about Chrissy?”

Billy felt himself bite at his tongue. Stupid kid was rifling through his things while he wasn’t looking, huh?

“Those are private letters, you little shit,” he snapped.

“So was my diary. Tit for tat,” she shot back. “So, do you really think it’s weird, yes or no?”

Billy leaned forward, wincing a little as his back spasmed. A hand dragged down his face, tongue clicking as he searched for the words to answer her.

“Yeah, sometimes,” he finally muttered. “What do you want me to say, Max? That I have a great time talking about someone who fucked off to Florida because it was too much for her to stay?”

The tv filled the awkward silence between them with a peppy jingle. It irritated Billy so much that the world was going on around them, happy and ignorant, while they were left with pieces of a shattered existence that didn't fit quite right together anymore.

He'd already done it once, years ago. He didn't need a repeat of the experience.

“You're mad at her, aren't you?” she asked in a small voice.

“Of course I'm fucking mad.” He let out a grunt, leaning back into the couch. “I get why she did it, Max. I'd leave too if I was her. But it doesn't make it suck any less that she's gone. And I'm not about to tell her that. She feels bad enough as it is.”

“I'm mad at her too,” Max added, almost inaudible at first. “I don't want to be, but I am.”

“Yeah,” Billy sighed, running a hand through his curls. “I don't want to be, either.”

8. a long distance birthday

All things considered, Chrissy was enjoying her time in Florida. The constant hurricane warnings had scared the shit out of her — *her dad and Lisa were nonplussed by them at this point* — but as the summer turned to autumn, she slowly had grown used to the weather.

For a while, she maybe thought it was the universe telling her she had made a mistake; that tornadoes and blizzards were more her speed. Maybe it wasn't her time to leave Hawkins.

All those doubts were just that: doubts. She would find strength in places she thought she had none. And when a letter showed up for her, she found more resolve to stay.

Being in Tallahassee reminded her just how much she had wanted this exact thing for years. How she had begged her dad to let her stay during visits. How every day for the last three years had been Chrissy trying to fill a void where her father had been, to no avail.

Now that she was here with him, she realized the hole wasn't completely filled. Her heart was torn every which way, and there was nothing she could do but learn to be okay with that.

"It's lookin' good, Teenie," her dad commented, looking over Chrissy's shoulder.

She perked up a bit at the nickname. He'd called her Teenie for as long as she could remember, a diminutive of '*Christina*' that her mother never seemed to like. It was his special name for her, something no one else in the world was allowed to use.

On one of the many scraps of untreated wood he had, she was practicing burning a pattern from one of her old how-to books. It was something she had enjoyed immensely as a child, especially after her parents' divorce. The passion had been lost to puberty and the pursuit of more 'feminine' things. Now, with too much time to kill and too many thoughts racing through her head, it had become her sanctuary

again.

“My curves are still super shaky,” Chrissy said, sitting back to take a look at the whole picture. “But I think I finally got down how to shade using this pen.”

“Steady your arm and move the wood, not your hand next time.” He set a hand on her shoulder, giving a kiss to the back of her head. “Always works better for me.”

Chrissy clicked off the machine, careful to set the pen far enough away from herself. She’d gotten a nasty burn the last time she had forgone safety.

“Whatcha working on?” she asked, looking up at him. “That china cabinet still?”

James Chapman — *she was, on paper, Christina Chapman-DiMartino, though not many knew* — was a woodworker, a carpentry gun-for-hire, as he liked to joke. At times, Chrissy couldn’t fathom how he and her mother had ever worked as a couple. He was so unbothered by the world, taking chances and throwing himself headlong into his dreams without much doubt. Perhaps, when Patty had been younger, she had been swept up in the shining world of possibilities he represented. It probably didn’t hurt that he was handsome, even as crow’s feet settled around his eyes and grey peppered itself in deep brown hair.

Chrissy loved him with everything she had. Loved every laugh she was the originator of, the fierce bear hugs and the way he sang loudly to The Stooges as he made dinner. She loved him despite the physical distance he had put between them years ago and how he never *quite* had the right fatherly advice for her.

“You bet,” James said, flashing a smile. “That damn cabinet is taking forever. If the asshole who ordered it hadn’t asked for dovetail joints it’d be done by now.”

Chrissy nodded. She wasn’t quite sure what he was talking about, but it was better to just let him talk than to ask and receive a rambling explanation.

"Come out, have a smoke with me," he drawled, rustling out his pack. That was another thing she loved. No Mom or Wes to tell her to not smoke.

The late morning sun was welcome on her skin as she followed him to the porch. Nina, the cocker spaniel James had adopted shortly after moving, was busying herself with a chew toy in the grass while their orange monster of a cat, Frank, was sunning himself on the steps. Chrissy gave a little smile. She'd never had pets, as her mother didn't have the time while they were growing up to give anyone else but her kids the attention.

"Is Lisa still pissed at me for using her mousse?" Chrissy asked, lighting a cigarette. "Because she shouldn't be. If she doesn't want me using her work stuff, she should keep it in her tote or at the salon."

"She's probably over it by now," James shrugged. "You two need to work out a system. That's not a battle I can fight for you, Teenie."

She liked Lisa enough, with her brick red hair and Goldie Hawn sense of style. Certainly more than she had when she first came into Chrissy's life, or the year she had finally convinced her dad to move to her hometown of Tallahassee. She had taken Chrissy's irritability in the weeks after she moved, the jumpiness and crying spells, all in stride.

"I'm not going to pry because it's your business," Lisa said one night when they were alone, "but my mom acted the same as you after my dad died in Korea. It'll pass, Chrissy. It'll hurt for a long while, but it will pass."

She liked Lisa a lot more after that.

"Did she tell you Michelle yelled at me in front of the whole salon because I accidentally hung up on a client?" Chrissy asked, watching her dad take a drag. "How does she work for her? She's got a stick up her ass."

"She's just a type A because she has to be. Running a business like that is hard work." James paused, giving her a wry smile. "If you can't stand her, get to work on those airline applications."

Chrissy pursed her lips, rolling her eyes. Her dad had compliments galore, but no sympathy when it came to her bitching. She supposed he and her mom had that in common.

She flexed the fingers on her left hand, taking a look at the slightly lighter tan of her forearm. She'd tried to use self-tanner to even out her arm after the cast had come off, but it still didn't match as perfectly as she would've liked. Now that it was off, she had no more excuses to not take initiative to follow her dream. With a little sigh, she put out her cigarette.

"Fine, I'll work on them now," she said, shooting him a tired look. "Only if you finish that stupid china cabinet."

James laughed. "It's a deal."

10/22/1985

Dear Billy,

I can't believe I'm almost 19. My dad keeps saying he's gonna take me to Busch Gardens, but we'll see. It's a long drive and my dad and Lisa both hate driving. A few of my friends here want to take me out anyway. I think you'd really like Nick and Kathleen. They're like... glued together but not in an annoying way. Nick's a HUGE Judas Priest fan, he met Rob Halford a few times while doing security at the stadium here.

I finally sent in my applications for Delta Air and Southern. Cross your fingers. Seriously. I want this job so bad. Also Michelle is a total bitch and I can't keep working for her anymore. I can't wait to quit in front of the whole salon.

Have you seen Annette lately? She hasn't sent many letters lately and the last time I called her, she was acting weird. Is she still with that Rob guy?

So... Whatcha getting me for my birthday? ;) If it's another "sexy" gift from Spencer's, I'm flying up and kicking you in the head. IT'S NEVER SEXY, BILLY. IT'S JUST DICK SHAPED PARTY FAVORS!!!

Love ya,

Chrissy

11/3/1985

Chrissy,

Hey, I picked those gifts out with precision. How dare you say they're not sexy. Dick shaped hard candies are perfect for you. Suck all you want and you never have to swallow.

Half of your real present is with the letter. It's a good mixtape, I promise. Lots of Prince and some stuff from the west coast you haven't heard yet. The other half I'm sending at the end of the week.

Do you want me to try to call you? I've got leftover money from the settlement. I could probably swing a short call. Sing you Happy Birthday or something. It's been 4 months since I've heard your voice. It'd be nice.

No clue what's up with Annette. Far as I know she and Rob are still together. She won't talk to me anymore. I think she's still holding a grudge from when we broke up. Don't blame her. If I hear anything I'll let you know.

Listen to the mixtape!

Love,

Billy

11/10/1985

Dear Billy,

I'd love a birthday call from you. I miss your voice. I miss all of you. It's stupid how excited I got reading that you want to give me a call. I

have to warn you though, I don't have my own line here so NO DIRTY TALK. Save it for when I have my own phone. Just kidding. I think I'd die if you did that.

The other part of my gift came today. I'm being good and not opening it till my actual birthday, even though it's gonna kill me seeing it sit there. I did listen to the mixtape and it was excellent. It's in the Bug now as my regular work commute music. I never pegged you as a Johnny Cash fan, but that cover of 'You Are My Sunshine' makes my day every time.

I finally FINALLY got ahold of Annette. You're not gonna believe this: she got pregnant. How stupid is she? She's known this guy for like 3 months! I guess Rob didn't bolt though so she's keeping it. Keep an eye on her for me? I know she doesn't want to talk to you but she needs all the friendly faces she can get.

Still waiting to hear back about my application. Keep your fingers crossed!

Love,

Chrissy

She had never been so excited for her birthday to roll around. Not in recent memory, at least.

But the promise of a call, being to hear Billy's voice for the first time in months, was perhaps the best present she could ask for. It meant he was well enough to do so, that he wanted badly enough to hear her voice.

She was just finishing up her hair — *Lisa had bought her a new curling iron that she HAD to test out* — when the phone rang out clear. Chrissy set down her tools, heart thumping hard in her chest. The ringing stopped, her dad's voice from the living room sounding out a few seconds later.

"Teenie! Phone call!"

Chrissy had never ran so fast to her room. Picking up the phone, she yelled back. "I got it, Dad!"

"Hello?" she asked breathlessly.

"Hey, birthday girl."

She could hear the smile in his voice. It made her grin so wide her face hurt.

"Hey yourself," she said, biting her bottom lip. "God, it's good to hear your voice."

"Sounds good to hear yours too." He paused, the clatter of stuff in the background suggesting he was lighting up a cigarette. "What the hell kind of name is Teenie? Should I start calling you that?"

"You do, I'll knock your teeth out."

Billy laughed hard, and she could almost see the crinkling of his eyes and the thousand-watt smile before her. Chrissy nearly melted at the sound. In that moment, there was no sound more beautiful and free.

"So," he said after he regained composure, "spill. Tell me what you did today. What your plans are tonight."

"Can I open my present first?" she asked, tucking a few strands of hair that had fallen in her face behind her ear. "I've been waiting for you to call so I can finally open the damn thing."

Billy laughed again, softer this time. "Sure, open it. I'm surprised you haven't already."

"I wanted you to hear my reaction," she grinned, pulling the tape slowly off the wrapping paper. "Did you wrap this? It looks really good."

"Why are you surprised I can wrap a present?" he asked, indignant.

"Jeez, touchy. Just didn't think it was a skill in your wheelhouse, is all."

The wrapping was tossed to the side. Chrissy slipped a scissors down the taped box, anchoring the phone between her shoulder and cheek. There were three items inside, neatly tucked between brown postal

paper. The first, she gingerly picked up and felt her heart lurch.

"The photos from when I got hired at the mall," she said softly. "You finally got them developed?"

"Mhm."

"We look so happy," she said wistfully as she shuffled through the stack of photos.

"We were happy," Billy said simply. "I mean, I know *I* was really happy when we took those."

Chrissy smiled. "I'll have to get a frame for the one of us sitting on the porch."

"You frame your pictures now? Jesus. You are grown up."

"Shut up."

Hands dove back into the box, pulling out a familiar shirt. It was one of the ones she had given back, a faded Motörhead t-shirt with the sleeves torn off. It was well loved; she had slept in it many a night, wore it to parties and bonfires. It smelled so distinctly like Billy again; she knew he had made sure of that.

"How much cologne did you put on this shirt?" she joked.

"Enough for it to last a while." She could almost feel the self-congratulatory smirk on his lips.

"My whole room is gonna smell like you."

"Good. That was the plan." He blew out an exhale. "Open the last one."

She stared at the little velour box, now sitting lonely in the cardboard and brown paper.

"Billy, *please* tell me you didn't spend a ton of money on this."

"I spent enough that it's special," he shrugged. "Besides, what're you

gonna do? Send it back?"

Chrissy took the box in her hand. It was slightly wider than the width of her hand, a sign this was definitely not a ring. A relief. She openly it slowly, letting out a little gasp as light shone off the contents.

A necklace, dainty and yellow gold, sat inside. On it was a pendant of a sun, at the center a moonstone so clear she thought it could be translucent.

"Do you like it?" Chrissy could hear the slight nervousness in his voice, hoping for her approval.

"It's gorgeous," she smiled, eyes transfixed on the pendant. "I'd wear it tonight, but I don't want to lose it if I get hammered."

"So you're going out with... *fuck*, what're their names." She heard him tutting. "Kathleen and Nick."

She settled back into her hoard of pillows, staring at the necklace against its little velour pillow. "Yup. They're taking me to a club that doesn't card."

"You gonna wear that mini dress you wouldn't shut up about?"

Chrissy let out a laugh. "You remember that?"

"Only because you gave me a preview of what it looks like." A soft chuckle came from his end of the phone, punctuated by a breathy groan. "*Fuck*."

"What?" she asked, eyebrows knitting together.

"It's nothing."

"Billy," she warned.

"You said no dirty talk," he protested. "What, you want me to tell you how hard I just got thinking of you in a stupid dress?"

Chrissy felt a blush creep onto her cheeks, the fires in her suddenly stoked up for the first time in months. "Sorry."

“Yeah, me too.” His voice grew husky as he shifted around.

It was quiet for a bit, quiet enough for her to hear the familiar riff of a Slayer song playing on his side of the line. She swallowed, feeling the impulse of old habits taking over despite her mental hesitance.

“You know,” she hummed, “I’d take care of that if I was there.”

Billy let out a frustrated groan. “God, you are the *worst*. ”

“You’d let me, though.”

“Yeah,” he breathed. “I’d wanna give you another birthday present first, though.”

Chrissy took in a sharp breath. “What would that be?”

“My tongue.”

She couldn’t help but let out her own frustrated groan. It suddenly hit her; the other times they had played this game, there was always relief in the days, hell, even the hours that followed. And now there was no relief in the form of his hands on her, nothing to follow up the words that had riled both of them up. Remorse bloomed inside her, squashing any desire to let this go further.

“Why are we doing this to ourselves?” she asked, strain lacing the edge of her words. “I didn’t want... This isn’t what I wanted. I wanted to talk to you like when we were just friends.”

“When were we ever ‘just friends’, Christina?” he shot back. “This is how it’s always been, whether you like it or not.”

“Maybe I don’t want it to be like that anymore!” Chrissy blurted out. “All the letters you’ve written me are so... so *normal* , and I thought maybe talking to you would be like that too. But I guess not.”

“You know what? You started it. I was gonna let it go, but you wouldn’t. If you wanted to have a normal ‘we’re just friends’ conversation, you shouldn’t have said anything about sex.” She heard him take a drag of his cigarette, exhaling angrily. “I’m not gonna waste my fucking money arguing with you.”

Fear clenched her heart. "Please don't hang up."

It was quiet on the other end, his breathing barely audible.

"I'm not gonna hang up," Billy sighed.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. "I'm being stupid, I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at me."

"I'm sorry, too." There was a pause. "I just... I think about you *all* the time, Chrissy and thinking about you like that is part of it. I can't separate the two. You're never gonna be 'just' a friend to me, okay?"

She understood what he felt completely. No matter how much she wanted to start over, to divorce their past from the rekindling relationship they had now, it would never happen. 'Just friends' was a hollow wish. If she was honest with herself, there was no way she would ever want that.

"Billy," she said meekly, "would you be mad at me if I had sex with someone else?"

There was no answer at first, just a deep inhale and a sigh.

"No," he finally said. "Jealous, but not mad. We don't know when we're gonna see each other again. I'm not gonna force you to become a nun."

"Same for you." She managed to crack a small smile. Like either of them would be able to handle a sex-less existence. "Just try not to screw anyone I know."

"That limits my options pretty severely," he teased before going quiet again. "Seriously, I'm sorry. I don't wanna ruin your birthday."

"You didn't," she said. "I just don't want you to be mad at me."

"Jesus, will you stop with that?" he sighed, letting out a muffled groan. "I'm not mad at you. It's your fuckin' birthday. I'm happy I get to be a part of it, okay?"

Not so deep down, she knew he was lying. He had every right to be

mad at her, for one reason or another.

“Billy?”

“What?”

“I miss you.” The words were so quiet she wasn’t sure he would hear them. She’d written them so many times, but saying them aloud carried a different weight, a realization of just how far apart they were now.

There was a pause so long she almost thought the call had dropped.

“I miss you, too.” Another pause. “It’s not the same here without you.”

Chrissy sat, absorbing what he had said. Her fingers ran against the shirt he had sent, feeling tears start to sting her eyes.

“It’s not the same without you, either,” she sighed, flopping back into her bed.

“Do you like it there, though?”

She wondered what he wanted to hear. If he was hoping she would say she hated it, that she had made a mistake to move to Florida. That she missed Hawkins.

“I do. I wish I could just bring you down here to stay with me.”

Billy snorted. “I don’t think your dad would like that very much.”

“He wouldn’t care,” she shrugged. “He’s, like, the total opposite of Wes. You’d really like him.”

“He sounded totally baked when he answered the phone.”

“He probably was. I’m telling you, *complete* opposite of Wes.”

“Well, shit,” he said, his voice lilting back up to a happier tone. “Maybe I should pack my bags.”

Chrissy couldn't help but giggle.

"Hey," Billy said, "how do you feel about the whole Annette thing?"

"Nervous for her," Chrissy admitted. "Her parents are freaking out more than she is. She kept saying how amazing Rob is handling the whole thing, but I'm just hoping she has a backup plan."

"Yeah. I don't know how long Rob will end up sticking around, though. He doesn't strike me as a very reliable dude." He sucked in a breath. "Glad that never happened to us."

"Me too," she agreed, toying with the hem of her shirt. Her eyebrows furrowed, hesitating before she started to speak again. "What would you have done?"

She heard him click his tongue, take another drag of his cigarette.

"Would've got my ass beat by Neil, first off," he said. "I dunno. What about *you*? You would've been the one getting the shittier end of the deal."

"I don't know," Chrissy admitted. The thought of either of them having to take care of a child, especially in hindsight, filled her with unease.

"Figured." He exhaled before letting out a hum. "Good thing it didn't happen, then."

"Mhm." She let the silence take hold again, sliding further into her bed to stare at the ceiling. She suddenly felt a pang of homesickness for the ugliness of her popcorn ceiling, the posters she had plastered on her walls.

"Do you want 'em though?" Billy asked, his nonchalant tone barely disguising his curiosity. "In the future, I mean."

"I think so. Like, a while from now, though. I have stuff I want to do." Chrissy squeezed her eyes shut. "Do you?"

"Jury's still out on that one." Billy let out a hiss. "*Fuck!*"

"What? What happened?"

“Stupid cherry fell off and I’m not wearing a shirt.”

“Billy!” Chrissy shot up, hair falling in her face.

“It’s fine,” he said quickly. “Didn’t hit anything important. I’m fine, I swear.”

She flipped the hair out of her face, blowing out an annoyed sigh. “Be careful. You don’t need more shit that needs healing.”

“I’m *fine*, ” he repeated. “It didn’t even leave a burn, okay? Calm down.”

Chrissy let out an irritated whine, drumming her fingers on her leg. She supposed he had enough people over there telling him to be more careful, to take it slow, to look out for himself more than he had in the past. She listened to his breathing, the tinny exhale and screeching chorus from ‘Seek and Destroy’ in the background.

“I have to go. Kathleen’s gonna be here soon,” she said softly. “Can we talk again sometime? Maybe Christmas or something.”

“Yeah, ‘course,” he said, relief and joy in his voice. “I’ll write you soon, too.”

“You better. And don’t burn yourself again.” A smile crept onto Chrissy’s face. “Love you, Billy.”

She heard a soft chuckle on his end of the line. “I won’t. Love you, too, sunshine.”

11/20/1985

Chrissy,

I'm sorry about things getting weird when I called. I really just wanted to talk. Not going to say I didn't mean what I said about us being just friends because I did, but I'm sorry I got mad at you. I kind

of wish you let me continue. Phone sex felt like the closest I was going to get to you for a long time.

Forget it. I'm just horny and alone and still hobbling around on crutches so no chick in this town is gonna want me anyway. It's a bad combination. I'm going crazy.

I'm really glad you liked your birthday gifts. Hope you wear the shirt and don't just let it sit in your closet. It always looked good on you. Maybe I'll take you to see Motorhead some time. You always liked them when I had them playing in the car. Or at least, you never complained about them like you did with some of the other shit I play.

I do really miss you. It was great to hear your voice. You sounded happy, even when you were yelling at me.

Billy

12/1/1985

Dear Billy,

Sorry I didn't answer right away. Things here have been crazy. Lisa got all of us sick with the worst flu I've ever had. We also thought Frank ran away, but he turned up a few days later. Stupid fucking cat.

Don't apologize, I'm the one who got mad. I wasn't prepared for what we talked about. I don't know why I thought things would go back to normal between us right away. I know you're still mad at me for leaving, no matter what you say. I just hope next time we talk we don't argue. I'm tired of arguing. I just want to laugh with you again. You have the best laugh.

It also sucked because I got horny again after we hung up. Like, if you were here, I would've jumped your bones, crutches and all. I hooked up with this guy at the club we went to but it was probably the worst sex I've had since Dan. I wish it would've been you. I kind of wish I let you finish talking, too.

Do you think about me when you... y'know? I'm really embarrassed to admit it, but since my birthday you've been my go-to when I have "me time". Which has been way more frequent than normal.

I feel like I'm just making this worse. Sorry.

Miss you,

Chrissy

12/8/1985

Chrissy,

Glad you're feeling better. I've been lucky I haven't gotten sick yet. Everyone's been careful to make sure it doesn't happen. I don't need any more setbacks.

Physical therapy sucks. I'm working with small weights and trying to build up muscle again since it atrophied while I was in the hospital. I haven't felt this weak since I was a kid. My body just stops working if I push it too much. Susan actually yelled at me because I fell the other day while I wasn't using my crutches. It's embarrassing.

And of course I think about you. Even when it doesn't start that way, you end up being what I think about when I have 'me time'. By the way, that phrase sounds so stupid. Can't believe I just wrote it. Just say it. Jerk off. Masturbate. Flick the bean.

I think I'm at a low point in my life because I did jerk off after your last letter. Fuck. I need to get laid, Chris. Are you sure I can't convince you to fly up?

Any news about your application? It's been a month. Hope you got an interview.

Love you,

Billy

9. paradigm shift

12/12/1985

Dear Billy,

I GOT THE JOB!!!!!!

My interview was actually the day before I got your letter. They really liked me and said I was one of the strongest swimmers out of the new flight attendants. I have to go to a mini-school now to learn all the job stuff. They even teach us how to do our makeup and hair. It's kind of nuts. I'm so nervous. But I'm also so excited to finally have my dream job.

You fell? Did you open any stitches or anything? I don't blame Susan for yelling. You need to be careful. It's gonna take a long time to get back to where you were, but you'll get there. I promise. I bet you're handsome even if your muscles aren't as big as before.

I'll come back up once you're strong enough to throw me over your shoulder and carry me around, ha ha.

You know what's weird? It's only been a little over a year since we first met. I don't know why, but it feels a lot longer.

I'll be sending your present (and Max's!!) soon.

Love you and miss you tons,

Chrissy

12/18/1985

Chrissy,

Presents are in the mail from me and Max.

Your mom came by, which I wasn't expecting. It was weird, but nice. She's so proud of you, Chris. Her face just lit up when we were talking about you getting the job at Delta. I'm proud of you too. As much as I wish you were still here, I'm glad you got out. You're doing what you kept telling me you would do once we graduated. If you stayed, I think it would've been so much harder for you.

I didn't open any stitches, just got a bruise on my ass. I feel like I shouldn't have said anything. Don't worry about me, okay? I'm doing fine. I'm just complaining like a little bitch. I have been able to walk from my room to the bathroom without the crutches lately. Small victories and all that shit.

I was thinking about how long we've known each other too. It still feels weird I can't just roll up to your house and hang out. Or that you're not climbing through my window. That shit used to annoy me so much, weird how I wish you'd show up and do it now. I miss you so fucking much.

I'll try to swing a call Christmas Eve. No promises though. Neil's been weird lately, and I'm pretty sure he'd lose his shit over a phone call. Even if I'm the one paying for it.

Love you.

Billy

No call came.

Chrissy knew better than to hold her breath, especially after Billy's last letter. It was less disappointment and more fear that she felt. Fear that Neil had gotten involved, that Billy was hurting again by a monster they couldn't rid themselves of. Fear that perhaps he had changed his mind.

Her fork clinked against the ceramic plate, barely aware of the idle chatter between her father and Lisa.

"What do y'think, Teenie?"

"Hmm?" Chrissy looked up to see her dad's expectant face.

"Told you, she's in her own world tonight," Lisa smiled. "We want to take a family trip. Your dad was thinking New Orleans. See the French Quarter, eat our weight in beignets and gumbo."

"Sure," she said, giving a half-hearted smile. "When are you planning on going?"

"Before Mardi Gras," James said, taking a bite of his chicken parmesan. "I'm trying to be mindful of your future flight schedule."

"Thanks." She took her own small bite. "I should be able to swing a few days off."

"See, I would think you'd be more excited. You love that kind of tourist trap stuff," he said, raising his eyebrows. "You still waiting for Billy to call?"

"Not anymore," she replied, glancing up at him for only a moment. "If he was able to call, he would've done it by now."

"That's a shame."

"He probably has a good reason," Chrissy added quickly. "I'll probably hear from him soon."

"You want to open one of the presents he sent?" Lisa asked, leaning on her hand with a smile. "We can all open one tonight. No shame in that."

"You just want to open up that one you've been eyeing all week," James laughed. "She's using you as an excuse, Teenie."

Chrissy cracked a smile, setting down her fork. This was what she should be focused on; the high spirits of her dad and step-mom. The anticipation of a new job, a family vacation. It would be what Billy would want for her to settle her mind on.

"Lisa is gonna open it after you conk out on the couch anyway. We might as well spare ourselves the fake surprise tomorrow," she grinned.

"Wow," Lisa said, faking a wounded look. "Wow. I can't believe you

two would gang up on me on *Christmas* .”

“Christmas Eve,” James reminded her. “After dinner, then. One present.”

The wrapping was so beautiful and ruler-straight that once again Chrissy had her doubts Billy had done it himself. She decided she would have to see it in action to actually believe him on that one. While her dad and Lisa cooed at each other over their gifts, Chrissy quietly unwrapped the medium-sized box.

Inside was a cassette and a pale blue knit sweater. The cassette’s case had a sticky note, “*LISTEN WITH HEADPHONES*” scrawled in his blocky handwriting.

“Gorgeous sweater,” Lisa commented, brushing brick red bangs from her face. “That boy of yours has good taste.”

As soon as her father and Lisa had settled in front of the tv, Chrissy made her way to her room. She dug out her Walkman, popping in the tape. With a deep breath and the *click* of the play button, she began to listen.

“Hey, pretty girl,” Billy’s voice greeted, crackling to life. “This isn’t a mixtape, if that’s what you were thinking. It’s just me. I kept thinking about how you’re gonna be flying soon, so phone calls might not happen as much. So, this is just gonna be me talking about whatever the fuck I can think of until the tape runs out. I might steal Max’s guitar, get real weird with it.”

Chrissy couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

“If you tell me you wear out this tape, I’m gonna assume you used it to get off one too many times. Maybe I’ll throw something special on side B for you to get your rocks off to. I don’t really have a plan here. I just wanted you to have my voice when you needed to hear it.”

There was a sigh on the recording. “You remember when I took you to Lover’s Lake before school ended? You were so stressed ‘cause you thought you weren’t going to pass your math class, which, honestly, I’m surprised you even did. But we went, and I threw you in, clothes

and all. You were *so* pissed at me, and I told you I didn't care if you were because you're pretty when you're wet. And then you threw a rock at me. I meant it, though. You looked so pretty that day. I should've told you that more. But I'm telling you now, so I guess it's better than nothing."

She squeezed her eyes shut, hands covering her face as tears started pricking at the corners of her eyes. Chrissy remembered that day clearly. He had tried to catch the rock she threw, ended up with a bruise on his forearm from miscalculation. After, he ran into the water towards her, chasing her down and splashing at her until she laughed and let him kiss her.

"You know what the worst part is?" the recording continued.

She had to stop herself from answering him. That brought more tears to her eyes.

"You know you're pretty. And you know you're funny." He paused. "You don't need me to tell you those things. But you needed me to tell you that I loved you and I was stupid. I waited and I shouldn't have. I hate feeling like I let you down that way. I'm not gonna do that again, Chrissy. I promise. So, just in case I didn't get to tell you over the phone, I love you."

The tears finally fell, a sob choking out as Chrissy clicked *STOP*. She would take the time to cry, to feel that deep loneliness she felt without him, and then let him continue to speak.

I love you, too. So, so, much.

2/1/1986

Dear Billy,

I have my first flight next week and I'm totally freaking out. Like, I keep thinking it's a huge mistake and that I shouldn't be doing this. Dad keeps having to talk me down from quitting. It's just... having my dream job and loving what I've learned so far is so bizarre. I'm afraid of messing it up.

On a brighter note, your birthday is coming up!! I have a present ready to send to you. I'm hoping it'll make you laugh, it's SO you. Do you want me to call you? I miss your voice so much. The tape you sent helps, but it's not the same as having a conversation with you. I promise I'll be on my best behavior. No arguing.

Love you,

Chrissy

2/6/1986

Chrissy,

Please call. I'm losing my fucking mind and hearing your voice would help. Neil is on a rampage right now. I think he figured I'm healed up enough to start yelling at again. I need to get the hell out of here, Chris. Once I get the OK from my doctor, I'm out. I can't do it anymore.

I sent you all that mushy stuff for a birthday present, and you're sending me back a funny gift? What a ripoff. Kidding. I'm sure it's great. You didn't have to get me anything.

You're going to do great flying. Everyone's going to love you. You've been going on about how much fun you've had training, too. I've never seen you so excited to learn anything.

If anyone gets handsy with you when you're working, let me know. I'll beat their face in as soon as I can.

Love,

Billy

Nineteen felt good. Better than eighteen had. He was still trapped in the family home, still hobbling around and irate at that fact, but there was again a foreseeable end to it. Billy had tucked away money from the government — *his hush money, as he and Max liked to call it* — ready for it to help with his eventual escape from this hellhole. When that would be was still iffy, but the thought that he could leave

as soon as he was ready was enough to get him through bad days.

So his good spirits only lifted when the phone finally rang. He snatched the phone off the receiver, not wanting to waste precious time waiting for his family to stop chattering to Chrissy.

“Hello?”

“Billy!” Chrissy’s voice rang out, breathless. “Happy birthday.”

He came alive when her voice filtered through his ears.

“Thanks,” he grinned. “You sound like you’ve been running or something.”

“I have. I booked it from the gate to the nearest payphone.” She took a deep breath, the exhale crackling over her end of the line.

“Wait, what? You’re calling from the airport?”

“An airport,” she corrected. “I’m in Cincinnati right now, actually.”

She was so close, a two hour drive away. “For how long?”

“An hour, tops, if snow doesn’t delay us.”

“Bummer,” he said, nonchalance hiding how his chest tightened and disappointment flickered within him. “I would’ve made the drive if it was longer.”

“Can you even drive yet?” she asked, doubtful. “I thought you still had the crutches and your leg was still giving out randomly.”

“I’d be fine.” It wasn’t a complete lie. His leg only gave out when he was upright, and driving wasn’t exactly the most taxing thing in the world. Getting to her gate would’ve be another story.

“if you say so,” Chrissy drawled. “So. How’s today been so far? Anything fun happen?”

“Not especially. Max gave me some band shirts. Susan and Dad bought me new clothes too. Standard shit.” He paused before adding,

"I guess we're going out to dinner though. Wasn't expecting that."

"Man, I wish I could be there to see that."

"Be grateful you aren't. It'll probably end in a fight or Neil fuckin' off to the closest bar after."

"Okay, okay. I wish you luck. Did you get my gift?" she asked. "I wasn't sure if it made it there on time."

"Yeah, it's here," he smiled. "I haven't opened it yet."

"Well, open it, dingus. I'm on a time crunch and I wanna hear your reaction."

"Okay, jeez," he laughed, ripping off the wrapping paper. Inside, there lay a mound wrapped in bubble wrap, about the size of his forearm, next to a smaller wrapped gift.

He took the larger thing out first, carefully unraveling it from the cushioning. He couldn't help but burst out laughing. A taxidermy head of an alligator lay inside, mouth open and baring its teeth.

"What the *fuck*, Chrissy?" he asked in disbelief, before cracking up.

"You like it?"

"It's fucking insane."

"But do you *like* it?" she repeated.

"I love it," he said, grinning so hard his face hurt. "It's badass, seriously. I'm putting this on my mantle. The hell did you get this?"

"There's a swap and meet near my house. This guy sells them and I thought you needed one. Open the other one."

He was way ahead of her. Polaroids spilled out, pictures of *her* in barely anything, then nothing at all as he shuffled through. His eyes widened.

"Jesus," he muttered.

"You like them?" she asked innocently.

"I send you all this sentimental crap for your birthday and I get taxidermy and porn?" He blew out a sigh. "Ugh, you know me too well."

Chrissy let out an excited squeal. "I'm so glad you like them! It took *forever* to convince Kathleen to help me take those."

Billy covered his face, hand dragging down before muffling another laugh. "You had *Kathleen* take these?"

"How else do you think they turned out so well?" she huffed. "She's like the next Bunny Yeager, I swear."

"You look like the next Playmate of the Year in these." His tongue ran against the ridges of his teeth as he grinned, taking a particularly close look at the first topless photo in the set. "Jesus, as if I didn't miss those tits enough as it is."

"If I was here longer, I'd say come on by and touch 'em," she said with a tiny sigh. "Bummer."

Billy leaned back on his bed, unable to tear his eyes away from the picture. Bummer was putting it mildly, now that he had these in his possession. Really, he just craved her closeness, her company. Sex would just be a bonus at that point. He let out a frustrated groan, staring up at his ceiling.

"You gonna be here at any point?" he asked.

"Not sure," Chrissy said, her voice a little sad. It seemed the realization of their narrow miss hadn't been lost on her either. "If I am, I'll let you know, okay?"

"You better."

There was silence, the faint sound of an announcement over the PA coming from her end.

"I have to go." Her voice seemed even sadder now, tired in a way he hadn't heard in a while. "I'm really sorry, I wanted to talk way

longer.”

“You’re working, don’t apologize.” He paused, rubbing at his eye. God, he needed a cigarette right now. “I’m just glad you got to call at all.”

“I love you, Billy.”

“Love you too, Chris.”

“Like a lot,” she said softly.

“Get off the phone and go to work, stupid,” he shot back playfully, hoping it’d disguise his own sadness.

“Fine!” she retorted, a giggle in her voice. “Talk to you soon?”

“Yeah. Talk to you soon.”

5/12/1986

Dear Billy,

Annette said she invited you to her baby shower. I’m glad you two are patching things up! It’s so crazy there’s going to be a little version of her in the world at the end of the month. I wish I could be there to meet her baby. It’s crazier to think my best friend is going to be a mom. Especially Annette of all people. Give her a big hug for me, if she lets you.

I had a flight to New York yesterday and they had me up front in first class. Some businessman asked me if I wanted to see a show with him after the flight. I don’t think they get the concept that I have another flight home to work. I might’ve gone with, he was offering to take me to see Cats. Kidding. He gave me the creeps.

I know you said your doctor might OK you to walk without crutches soon. Did that happen yet? I hope so. You’ve been working so hard.

Love you,

Chrissy

5/20/1986

Chrissy,

I am crutch free as of two days ago. Officially, at least. It feels so fucking good to be walking around by myself again without Max or Susan yelling at me for not following “doctor’s orders”. The pool is opening up soon, so I think I’m going to start swimming there. My doc said it’s a good idea too, easier on my body or something.

I swear to god, if you get roped into following someone off a plane, you’re going to go missing. Don’t even joke about that.

Annette’s baby shower was awkward as hell. I left part way through. She almost started crying when I gave her a hug. We all miss you, but I think she really wishes you were here right now.

Love,

Billy

10. i stall before i start

9/4/1986

Dear Billy,

So... some not great news. I got in a car accident today. I'm fine, but Ms. Bug is going to be in the shop for a while. I'm not excited about wasting money on a cab to get to the airport while she's gone. Renting a car doesn't make sense, unfortunately.

I get to do my first international flight in a few weeks! It's just to Canada, but it's still a huge deal to me. I've never been out of the country. Maybe they'll let me do one to Mexico or Europe. I'll take pictures and send you some.

I feel so bad for Annette. She called me a few days ago and told me Rob left her and Cam. If you see him, feel free to beat the shit out of him. He deserves it. What kind of guy walks out on their girlfriend and baby? He's not even half a year old. I hope she finds someone better.

I miss you so much lately. I'm always tired when I get back home and I wish you were there to fall asleep with. I miss your smile. I thought I saw you in the airport in Phoenix once and I cried. I knew it wasn't you, but he looked so much like you I almost went after him. I don't know when I'll be ready to go back to Hawkins but I'm trying to work up the courage. Something always stops me and I'm tired of it. I'm so, so tired of missing you.

Let me know if you get that job, by the way. I know it's just at the grocery store, but it's a start. It'll get you out of the house and maybe you can meet some people.

Love you,

Chrissy

10/10/1986

Chrissy,

Shit, how are you already 20? You better come up once we're both 21. There's a bar in Indy that Tommy's college buddy never shuts up about. It feels weird that he's in college. He's not the most diligent guy, you know? I think it's just an excuse for him to keep partying. Not that I mind. They throw some pretty good keggers at his place. I can still do a keg stand, by the way. All that time lifting again paid off.

I heard about Rob. Harrington actually told me. He's been keeping tabs on Annette, which is nice of him. I think he has the hots for her, actually. I thought he was dating that weird Robin chick, but I guess they're just roommates.

You remember El? Max's friend? She's been hanging out here a lot lately (I think her dad's place is getting renovated or some shit) and she asked about you the other day. I forgot you two met. She's a weird kid, talks kind of funny. But she's always nice to me whenever I see her. She doesn't have to be, but she is. Max's other friends all keep their distance. I don't blame them. I wouldn't want to hang around me after everything that happened either.

I've been thinking about Heather Holloway a lot lately. She would've been 20, just like us. I kept thinking when I went to the pool this summer that she'd be there, yelling at the kids or reading magazines at the booth. It messes with me so bad, Chris. She'd still be alive if she didn't know me. She'd be doing big things with her life and now her whole family is just gone. Sometimes I don't know how to deal with it. The others I didn't know, but I knew her. I miss her, in a different way than I miss you. I know you'll come back someday, and she never will.

I didn't mean to unload all that on you. You're the only one besides

the shrink I see that I feel I can talk to about it.

Present's on the way. Let me know if you'll be home on your birthday so I can call. If not, we'll figure it out.

Love you.

Billy

"Why are you going so slow? Speed the fuck up. It's a country road, no one's behind you."

"Shut up, I'm trying to concentrate," Max retorted. Her grip on the steering wheel was turning her knuckles white.

"You drive like Grandma Wendy."

"She's a safe driver!"

"Max, I swear to god," Billy said, irritation in his voice. "It *literally* will not kill you to drive a little faster."

"I hate driving Mom's car," she complained. "Why couldn't you take me in the Camaro?"

"Because you're not driving my car, shit-for-brains. Especially not for your road test."

Christ. He shuddered thinking of Max behind the wheel of his baby again. After all the money he had sunk into getting it fixed, there was no way he'd let a driver greener than grass take control of it.

His head jerked forward, the car breaking hard.

"Jesus *Christ*, Max!" he exploded. "You're gonna give me whiplash. Why the hell did you stop?!"

She gave him a quick glance, then pointed in front of them. "There's a dead thing on the road."

"Drive. Around. It."

"You are the worst teacher, you know that?" she shot back, the car

moving forward again at a snail's pace. "I should've just had mom take me out today."

"She would've freaked you out even more." Billy leaned over, checking the speedometer. "Why are you going 30? Limit's 55 here. Speed up."

Max grumbled and pushed her foot down on the pedal. Billy shot her a dirty look, digging out a cigarette and his lighter. She was still going slightly under the speed limit, but it was better than her grandma pace before.

Even if she thought he was a bad teacher, he still had offered to take her in the first place. It was the least he could do to give back all the hours of her watching over him. Besides, if she still wanted that 'Cuda she had told him about years ago, she'd have to learn to drive with the style and confidence required of a muscle car.

"Turn left here. And remember your turn signal," he instructed, pointing as he lit up. "You better pass your test. I can't drive you everywhere once I move out."

Creamy knuckles turned stark white again against the wheel. "What?"

"I said, you better pass—"

"No," Max interrupted, glancing at him before checking the rear view mirror. "About you moving out. I thought your doctor said you shouldn't for a while."

"I got the okay from him months ago," Billy said, waving her off. "You really think I'm going to spend more time than I need to under Neil's thumb?"

She didn't answer, just kept driving with a hard look on her face. Billy clicked his tongue.

"Pull into that parking lot." He let out a stream of smoke from his nose. "I'm not talking about this while the car's moving."

He could hear a few stray pieces of gravel crunch under the tires as it

came to a complete stop. Max at least had the parking thing down.

“Are you gonna move out soon?” she finally asked, staring straight ahead at the flattened lot before them.

“I don’t know,” he sighed, rolling down his window further. The spring air was welcome, especially after being cooped up through winter. “Probably.”

“Are you going back to California?”

Billy looked over at the redhead, eyebrows furrowed. She was looking back at him already, fear she so often hid behind a stony face on full display.

“No.” He’d thought long and hard about it. The chance to finally leave, to forge his own path back in the comfort of sunshine and beachers, was tempting. But he was needed here. He needed the people here. There were thoughts that sometimes came to him in the darkest parts of night, and without the people who cared for him here, he feared more. He feared action.

“So, you’re just going to stay in Hawkins?” Max asked. “That’s lame.”

“What, so you *want* me to fuck off to California?”

“No,” she said quickly. “I just thought you hated it here.”

“I don’t hate all of it.” He paused, taking a drag. “And you’re here. I don’t hate you.”

She gave a tiny smile, leaning back into the seat. It slowly faded with the quiet between them.

“I wish I could get out, too,” she said quietly. “I don’t want to be in that house anymore, either.”

Billy squirmed in his seat, flicking the ash out the window. Max was a victim of age; too young to take control of her life, watching everyone else she loved make choices that affected her, for better or worse. He’d been in the same position. The least he could do was give her an out.

"Look," he said, "if you help me look at places, I'll find a two bedroom apartment or something. You can crash whenever you need to. I'm not gonna let him ruin your life, Max."

"You think he ruined yours?"

"Yeah," he said grimly. "He did. But I'm trying to fix it."

"You're gonna give me my own room at your place?" she asked, wide eyed and hopeful.

He eyed her up, giving an impish grin. "You'd rather sleep on the couch? 'Cause that can be arranged."

"Hell no," Max said, face screwing up. "I want the room."

"Then get back on the road and go the speed limit this time," he said, taking out a cigarette from a crumpled pack. He was going to need another if this drive was going to continue. "If you can manage that then you can get your own room at my place."

3/24/1987

Dear Billy,

One of the girls I work with, Sloane, took me to see Duran Duran and I about DIED. They're so great live and Simon Le Bon is an angel. My dreams came true. I can die happy now.

Max said you've been helping her with driving lessons. That makes me so nervous. You drive like a maniac. I don't think Hawkins needs another one of you tearing down the street like you're in a car chase. I can't believe she's going to be 16! It makes me feel old. Same with Caitlin, she's going to be 9 next month. I feel like they're going to be completely different people when I see them again.

Can you call me next month? I feel like I need the moral support. My schedule is terrible and I haven't seen anyone in weeks besides the people I work with and my parents.

Love you,

Chrissy

7/1/1987

Chrissy,

I can't believe it's been 2 years already. It's weird. It feels like a lifetime ago, but also like I just got out of the hospital only a couple months ago. It felt the same way last year. I don't think it'll ever feel completely real, what happened at Starcourt.

Hope you have some time to do something fun for the holiday. I'm gonna get as high as possible and watch wrestling with Max. She's hilarious when she's stoned. Should've let her smoke with me earlier.

I don't hate fireworks as much as I used to. If they're far away, I can usually deal with it. It's just when it's up close and constant that it messes with me. Max comes to stay by me if there's going to be a big celebration. She doesn't have to. She could be out doing shit with her nerdy friends. I'm lucky, she's a good kid.

My new address is on the envelope, by the way. New number is 555-6833. Give me a call sometime, I want to use my fancy new phone.

Love,

Billy

8/28/1987

Chrissy,

Haven't heard from you in a while. Is everything ok? I know how busy you've been, but I worry.

Nothing really new here. Started looking for a new job, the grocery store fucking sucks. It doesn't pay enough and I'm sick of the stock room. I've got a few things I'm looking into, maybe doing an apprenticeship somewhere since I took all those auto-shop classes.

Max passed her driving test. She won't shut up about that Barracuda she's wanted for years. I probably sounded just like her before I got the Camaro. I highly doubt Neil and Susan are gonna throw down more money for another muscle car. She's probably going to get something safe and boring, poor kid.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Love,

Billy

9/4/1987

Dear Billy,

I'm sorry for not writing. I'm fine, just busy like you thought.

Please don't be mad if I don't answer right away, especially once the holidays roll around. My schedule is really hectic right now, and it's only going to get worse once Christmas comes. I don't really have seniority yet, so my schedule is full and I still get a lot of crappy flights.

I did a flight to Barcelona this week though. I'm really glad I didn't completely flunk Spanish in high school otherwise they wouldn't let me do international flights. It was really stressful. Lots of turbulence and there were a few flyers that were really rude. It's a 15 hour flight. I'm fucking exhausted. I did get to hang out at the beach for a bit, so that was refreshing. Lillian, one of the other girls on the flight, took me to her favorite cafe. I hope I get to fly with her again. She's such a sweetheart.

I've been thinking lately about moving to Chicago. Florida is nice and

all, but it'd be easier for international flights since O'Hare's an international airport. I'd be closer to you too. I'm not sure yet. I've never lived alone and moving to a whole new city by myself scares me. I have time to figure it out. Work up my nerve and all that.

I hope you're doing okay. I miss you a lot lately. There are days I come home and I wish I could just sleep next to you.

Love you,

Chrissy

12/12/1987

Chrissy,

I know you're flying on Christmas Eve, any chance I can call you on Christmas? I feel bad I couldn't last year. If not, let me know when we can talk. I feel like I'm losing it, not hearing your voice.

Your present's in the mail. Sorry if it isn't on time, I've been really busy too.

Max has been helping me decorate my place for Christmas. It's weird as hell, I'm not sure if I really like it. I was just going to hang some lights on my porch and call it a day, but Susan and Max brought over a fake tree for me and some ornaments. I've dropped a bunch of them so far. Their fault for buying shit that breaks so easily.

If I don't hear from you, Merry Christmas!

Love,

Billy

Hawkins was nothing but snow and never-ending views of far off distances once more. Billy wasn't sure if he hated it more now or the first winter he had spent here. This time he felt more prepared for the chill and the lack of sunlight, at least.

This January morning, he grumbled to himself as a lit cigarette dangled from his lips. Susan had bought him the ice scraper he had wanted for Christmas, and it was getting plenty of use over the past few days. He had stupidly forgotten to pull into his side of the garage the night before, and was now paying the price in the form of an iced up windshield.

Dammit, he thought. *This shit isn't gonna come off without a fight.*

He went to turn the car on to let the heat fill the interior, stopping when he remembered his neighbor's warning.

There was a stupid stray cat she liked to feed, and apparently cats liked to huddle in the engines of cars for warmth. Billy sighed. He wasn't about to accidentally kill a cat when he already was running late to pick up Max.

Snow crunched beneath his boots as he made his way to the engine. He gave a few swift hits to the hood, hoping it would scare out anything huddling inside the Camaro.

Nothing.

He took a long drag, sighing out the smoke into the frigid air. Just as he was about to make his way back to the driver's seat, he heard a tiny meow.

Very tiny, and very muffled. *Definitely* not the stray's voice. Eyes narrowed at the hood.

"Motherfucker," he muttered under his breath as he popped the hood. "All right, where are you, you little shit?"

It took a second to spot the fuzzy intrusion. It had trapped itself under the intake hose somehow, meowing frantically. With a swift move, he took the kitten by the scruff, pulling it out as gently as he could.

It couldn't have been more than a few months old. The poor thing was covered in black smudges, covering up the diluted calico pattern. It was thin enough he could see its ribs. There wasn't much fight in it, either.

Billy let out a sigh. Tossing the kitten in the snow when it looked this wretched was just as much a death sentence as if he turned on the car with no warning.

"Fine, you're coming with me," he told the kitten, tucking it into his coat. "Then it's the shelter for you after I grab Max."

Billy had promised days ago that Max could stay at his place over the weekend. She liked his flat, how with space to spread out, it took on his personality. She had her own room to sleep in, an air mattress in the corner of a shared space with his weight set.

He was surprised that the kitten hadn't tried escaping from his coat on the drive over. It seemed to revel in his warmth, breaths pushing in and out against his own chest. It desperately needed to be fed, that was for sure. He wasn't really sure what it would eat. Milk? Soft food? He had some turkey in the fridge back home that might do the trick.

No, he chastised himself. You're not bringing this thing home. It's going to the shelter.

As soon as Max laid eyes on the kitten, he knew that wasn't happening.

"It's so cute!" she cooed, rubbing a finger against its hollow cheek. "Aw, Billy, it *needs* you. You can't just drop it off at the shelter now. It's all snuggled up to you."

"I don't know jack about taking care of a sick cat," he protested, voice gruff.

"We can swing by the veterinarian on the way to your place," Max suggested, slipping on her coat.

"It might be good for you," Susan commented, taking a look at the calico. "I've heard animals help give structure to people's lives."

He nearly glared at her for the enabling words. He didn't need structure. He had a job, which provided more than enough structure for his liking during the week. Weekends he had Teresa and her perfect blowjob lips, like fucking clockwork. Taking care of a tiny

animal would get in the way of that.

“Where’d you find it?” Max asked.

“Under the hood of my car.” He winced a little as needle-like claws started kneading at his chest. “It was trying to get warm.”

“It’s fate, Billy,” Susan said, a smile teasing at her lips. “Besides, the shelters are full this time of year. They’ll probably just put the poor thing down.”

“You are not helping.”

“You’re not helping yourself by carrying it around like a baby,” she said, walking over to dig through her purse. Before Billy could retort, Susan slapped down a twenty in his hand. “Max, make sure he goes to the supermarket and buy a litter box and some food.”

“You got it,” Max grinned.

It wasn’t so bad, after the first few days of adjustment. Max had told him to pick a name, after getting irate that he just was calling her ‘Cat’. He settled on Chevy. It seemed to fit. She purred as loud as the Camaro and bolted through his flat just as fast.

She became part of the structure of his life.

Some mornings, he would wake up to Chevy kneading on his chest, others, biting at his hair. She learned to perch on his shoulders as he walked around the house, content with the view and contact. Nipped at his hands if he tussled with her too much. Laid quietly next to him on bad days when pain flared up, rendering him useless to anything else. Kept her distance when Teresa came by.

Billy liked it best when she would lazily saunter over to him when he came home from work. The flop at his feet, a chirping meow that signaled Chevy’s demand for her dinner. It felt like a life he could find comfort in, now that he wasn’t so alone.

11. layover

JUNE 1988.

Truthfully, she was more nervous stepping off this plane than her first flight.

There's no reason to be nervous, she told herself. Like most rural Midwest towns, nothing was bound to change. The people, the buildings, the fauna, all were stalwart. They never seemed to yield to time.

Nerves slowly fell to the wayside as she made her way out to the baggage carousel. There was her mom, Caitlin, and Wes, all smiling faces and arms waving so fast Chrissy thought they might fly off their bodies. Wes lost weight, her mother gained some. Caitlin shot up like a tree, now only a foot shorter than herself.

Careful not to trip in her heels, Chrissy made her way over, a smile plastered on her face. In between the tears and her mother's coos of "You look so pretty!", Wes brought her into a hug.

"Glad to have you back home, Christina," he said, squeezing her tight. Chrissy only hugged back harder, burying her face in his shirt.

He was right. She was finally home.

Chrissy had thought for a moment she had escaped the extreme humidity of Florida for her duration in Hawkins. It seemed that was not the case. Summer was in full swing, the air lying heavy and damp on everyone.

There wasn't much she was familiar with anymore in town, especially when it came to avoiding the heat. According to Caitlin, the pool was the only way that was even remotely fun. Chrissy could use some fun. She'd spent the entire night at her parents' house, bored out of her mind after things had died down. Chrissy had never been so thankful for a stack of old magazines next to her bed in her life.

The two sisters trekked to Hawkins Community Pool, cooler filled with goodies their mother had lovingly stuffed in and inner tubes in hand.

"So you're really a good swimmer now?" Chrissy asked nonchalantly, setting her sunglasses on top of her head.

"I took more lessons while you were gone. Of *course* I'm good," Caitlin shrugged, letting the plastic inner tube hit her legs as they walked into the pool area. She really had grown into the sass the DiMartino women were known for in Chrissy's absence.

Wes must love that, she thought wryly.

"Okay, but if I catch you struggling, you gotta stay in the shallow end —"

Her sentence hung unfinished in the air, drowned out by children's screams of joy and water splashing against the sides of the cement. Chrissy had glanced over to the far end of the pool, scoping out who was in the chair out of habit.

Billy Hargrove was sitting on the lifeguard chair.

It can't be, she thought. *There's no fucking way.*

He was far enough away that she could play it off as a lookalike. He was far more tattooed, had long hair pulled back in a low ponytail, his facial hair looking more complete. But those were things that changed with time. She'd have to get close to *really* know, and Chrissy wasn't about to make an ass of herself trying to check.

"Can I go in now?" Caitlin asked, picking at a hangnail.

"Yeah," Chrissy said, distracted. "Sure. Just stay on this side so I can

see you, Cat."

As her sister made her way into the crowded pool, Chrissy pulled on her sunglasses again. It'd be easier to sneak furtive glances his way. She would fucking figure this out before she flew back out to Tallahassee, or it would drive her crazy.

Minutes passed. Chrissy watched as the potential Billy swapped spots with the guard closer to her. In that instant, she knew without a doubt it was him. The structure of his face, the way he walked. The scars that rippled across his torso. There was no way it could be anyone else but Billy.

Her heart jumped as he shot a look her way. The way his eyebrows raised and lips parted slightly, she could see he was surprised. His eyes lit up bright even under the protection of his aviators.

Maybe I should say something. The brunette stayed in her spot, sneaking glances up at Billy who was intently watching the pool. She decided against it. The last thing she wanted was for him to get in trouble for being distracted.

Minutes passed by in a sluggish parade. She started to get antsy. A few laps sounded like a good way to kill the jitters temporarily, plus she was starting to feel too muggy for comfort. Slipping off the chaise, she made her way to the pool, jumping in and taking in the cool water around her.

As she surfaced, she glanced at the lifeguard chair. Billy was gone, swapped out with someone else. Chrissy couldn't help but be disappointed. If he had seen her dive in, seen her surface and make eye contact, it would've removed any excuse to not talk to him.

Chrissy continued to swim, lap upon lap in the lanes. Anything to work off the disappointment and nerves that had consumed her. What would she even say to him? She hadn't expected to see him here of all places. If she was being honest with herself, she had been trying to work up the nerve to call him for *days*, the words to herald her return lost.

Water collected in pools around her, first arms, then her legs as she

climbed out of the water. A quick glance Caitlin's way gave her some peace of mind. As she squeezed out the chlorinated water from her hair, Chrissy meandered her way back to their chairs. She plunked down, watching the chaos in the pool. It was a hypnotic swirl of people, lulling her into some state of peace. Chrissy let out a sigh, giving one last glance at the further lifeguard chair.

He was walking her way.

She was sure her heart was visible with how hard it thudded away in her chest. She stood slowly, not making a move as to let him come to her. He took off his sunglasses, Chrissy following suit. All the air seemed to suck out of the bubble around them. She wasn't quite sure if this moment was one she wanted to last as long as it was.

"Chrissy?"

Hearing his voice come from his mouth, pure and without the crackle of the telephone, was almost a religious experience. It was *him*, all of him, right before her.

"Billy," she breathed. "Oh my god."

"Yeah," he answered, looking her up and down. "Hey."

"Hey!" Chrissy exclaimed, biting her lip. She couldn't suppress the enormous grin spreading across her face. "So, am I getting a hug or are we just...?"

"Yeah, of course." Billy's voice was laced with a laugh. Thick arms wrapped her, pulling Chrissy close. Her own arms enveloped him, squeezing as tight as she could. Hawkins wasn't home, she realized. *This feeling is home.*

"You're warm," she muttered into his sun-kissed skin.

"I've been outside all day," he chuckled. "Kinda comes with the territory."

"It's nice." A slight waver came through her words. *Fuck. Not now.* She had suppressed most of her emotions so far, but being in his warm embrace allowed them to all bubble over.

Billy pulled away slightly, trying to get a look at her face. "Hey, are you crying?"

"No!" Chrissy protested. She gave a slightly tearful smile, rolling her eyes as her palm swept away any tears that threatened to fall. "Maybe. A little."

His body pressed against hers again, the ghost of a kiss on the top of her head lingering. "Don't cry, Chris. At least wait until we're not in public."

"I can't help it," she said, rubbing away budding tears from her eyes. "Last time I saw you, you were in a hospital bed. Now look at you. Your tattoos. And your *hair*."

"Look who's talking," he grinned, leaning back to take a good look. "Dig the suit, by the way."

She felt a flush rise to her cheeks. "So, what, you decided to go back to the lifeguard gig instead of the grocery store?"

"Nah," Billy shrugged. "I just cover shifts on the weekend when Sean needs me to. I work at Fallon's Auto now, started after the last time I heard from you. You should tell your mom to get rid of the station wagon, by the way. It's nice seeing her so often, but the thing is a money pit."

"I hate that thing," she agreed before making a face. "So weird you talk to my mom."

"It's a small town." He leaned in again. "Quick question, and don't get pissy at me for it."

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Did you get a boob job?"

Chrissy gave him an incredulous look. "Hell no, these are all me. Why the *hell* would you think—"

"They got bigger, then," Billy smirked. As flustered as she was, it was a relief to see him so playful and vibrant. The two of them sat onto

the plastic lounges, Billy scooting his closer. "You in town for long?"

"Only a few days," she said, clicking her tongue. "I had a flight to Indianapolis and decided to take a couple days in between to visit."

"Were you gonna tell me about it?" His eyebrow quirked up, leaning back onto his hands.

"I mean, yeah." Chrissy looked down at her hands. "I just wasn't sure you would wanna see me."

Billy let out a scoff. "Of course I'd wanna see you."

As they spoke, it took all Chrissy's power to stay focused on their conversation. His lips, she realized, were so agonizingly beautiful. It took everything she had to not lean forward and plant a kiss right there and then. She wondered if he thought the same thing.

"I'm off in an hour," Billy said suddenly. "If you want, we can catch up. Get food, drive around. I can show you what all changed in this shithole since you left."

For some reason, even though there wasn't a hint of malice or bitterness behind it, hearing her move described as "leaving" hurt. But that's what it was, wasn't it? She had left, and no amount of convincing over the past three years could change that fact.

"Sure," Chrissy grinned, turning her head to catch a glimpse of Caitlin plodding towards them. "We're probably gonna head out, so it works for me. Gotta get this chlorine smell out of my hair."

"So," he said, clicking his tongue, "I'll pick you up around four?"

"You don't have to," she protested. "I can use my mom's car—"

"I want to," was the insistent answer.

"Billy!" Cat called out excitedly, doing a hurried walk as she drew near.

"Hey," he greeted, giving her a grin. "Long time, no see."

“Mommy doesn’t like going to the pool,” she said. “Too loud.”

“Sounds like Mom,” Chrissy said, rolling her eyes. “You pruned enough to head out?”

Caitlin nodded, gripping the plastic of her inner tube.

“Well,” Billy said, rubbing at his nose, “I’ll see you chicas later. I gotta see a man about a schedule.”

Chrissy felt her heart quicken again as he squeezed her hand, giving her a lazy grin as he sauntered towards the office.

“Bet it’s nice seeing him again,” Caitlin beamed.

“Yeah. Really nice.” Chrissy looked down, raising her eyebrows. “You gonna hit the showers or wait until we’re home? Because I need optimal time in the shower when we get back.”

Caitlin made a face. “I’ll do it here. You take too long.”

As she watched her younger sister bound towards the showers, Chrissy felt herself let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Slowly, she packed up, pulling her wet hair into a small ponytail before throwing on the jean shorts and cropped shirt she had arrived in.

As she left the poolside, she pulled a cigarette from her purse. She wasn’t allowed to smoke in the car, even with the windows down, so while Caitlin was dawdling, she at least had time for a nicotine fix. Chrissy dug through her bag, eyebrows knitting together in concentration.

“Oh, shit,” she muttered, patting around her shorts in hopes the lighter was there.

“You lose something?”

Chrissy turned, seeing Billy saunter up beside her.

“Yeah, I think I dropped my lighter somewhere.” She let out a huff, taking the cigarette from her lips. “Was hoping to get one in before

Cat was done in the showers.”

Billy grinned, nudging her as he walked past. “You can use mine. C’mon.”

She tagged behind him, a grin spreading across her own face. As he leaned against the warm brick of the entrance, he flicked the lighter on, letting her light her cigarette.

“Wanna share?” Chrissy asked, holding it out to him. “I’m not gonna be able to finish before she comes out.”

“Sure.”

“They’re Golds, just so you know.”

“Figured,” he smirked, taking the cigarette and drawing in a long drag. The smoke filtered out through his mouth and nose, a little sigh sneaking through. “God, these *suck*. How do you smoke them? They don’t taste like anything.”

“If you’re gonna complain, I’m not gonna share,” she retorted, trying to grab the cigarette from him. With a cheeky grin, Billy pulled his arm far from her reach before taking another drag.

“Here,” he offered, handing over the stick.

Chrissy stuck her tongue out before taking a less intense drag than he had. They stood in silence, arm against arm. Chrissy stole a glance up at Billy, only to see he was looking at her.

A few beats lingered between them, pulsing with the energy she thought would have waned years ago. Billy leaned in, planting a soft kiss on her lips. It seemed to steal her breath, so gentle but purposeful.

She kissed back. Slowly at first, a tentative taste of him that she had wanted for so long. More kisses bloomed between them, each one savored. They could’ve melted into the sidewalk together and she would not have minded one bit.

His breath was the only welcome heat against her face as he pulled

away. Blue eyes took in her face as he gave a smile. He plucked the cigarette from her fingers, taking the last drag of it before flicking the butt into the dirt.

“I’ll see you at four,” Billy said softly, his tongue tracing the ridges of his teeth. He didn’t give her a chance to reply, making his way back to the pool area.

“Dammit,” Chrissy muttered, rifling through the sparse contents of her closet.

She had left clothes at her mother’s house, things she didn’t really wear but had too much attachment to give away. The clothing she had brought with didn’t feel *right* for whatever the hell she had agreed to.

Her first thought was the leather skirt from their first date. Chrissy had thought Billy might appreciate the throwback, but it wasn’t fated to be. It was now slightly too tight against her softer hips, furthering the mounting frustration.

This is stupid, she thought as her lips pursed. *He doesn’t give a shit what I wear. It’s just gonna come off at some point, anyway.*

The loud *ziiip* of her luggage filled the pink bedroom as Chrissy dug through the neatly packed clothes. Maybe he would care. If she came wearing pants or shorts, he’d probably take it as disinterest. There was no way she would be willing to risk that assumption.

Finally, she settled on a sundress with a clasped front that hit just above the knee. Smoothing it over her curves, she took a long look at herself in the mirror.

“You look cute,” came her mother’s voice from the doorway. “Understated. It’s refreshing.”

‘It’s refreshing’ was Patty speak for *‘Thank god you learned to show less*

skin'. Chrissy chose to ignore the slight dig.

"Thanks," Chrissy answered, digging out some earrings from her bag.

"You should pack pajamas," Patty said, coming further into the room.

Chrissy shot her an incredulous look as she put on her earrings. Her mother's face was casual, watching her with almost a sweet smile.

"What? Why?"

"Christina, don't even pretend like you're coming home tonight."

"Gross. You don't know that."

"You're both adults, I don't care what you do—"

"Mom," Chrissy groaned, hanging her head down. "Can we not?"

"Okay, okay," Patty said, holding her hands up as she turned around to leave. "I'm just saying you'll be a lot more comfortable tonight if you bring some with you."

She watched as her mother left, closing the door softly. Chrissy looked back down at her luggage. How her mother was so sure she'd stay was slightly unsettling. She wondered how much Billy and her mom had spoken about her, if their friendly relationship was now clouding the expectations of both of them. She let out a long sigh, pushing her hair back from her face.

Instead of pajamas, she grabbed a few extra pairs of underwear, stuffing them in her purse. After a moment of debate, she slipped off the pair she had put on, tucking them in with the rest.

There, she grinned. No confusion there with what I want now.

The chime of the doorbell rang out through the house.

Chrissy had never felt nervous for a date before, but the jitters she had were now undeniable with Billy's arrival. She shot out of her chair, making her way to the front door before anyone else had the chance to talk to him.

He looked superb. Hair wild and free, natural loose curls pushed back from his face by his aviators. His deep green button down shirt hanging open nearly to his belly button, showing off the shark bite-like scar on his chest. A pair of tight jeans completing the look. He knew what worked for him, that was for damn sure.

"Hey," Billy greeted, unable to suppress a grin from his face.

"You even came to the door?" she teased. "What a gentleman."

"What, you thought I was just gonna honk?" He raised his eyebrows, giving a smirk. "Your mom would ream me out."

"Since when do you care what my mom thinks?"

"Since she started bringing me lunch when she comes by for the station wagon," he retorted. "You coming or not?"

She slipped into the passenger seat, and the world felt right again. It was as if they hadn't missed a beat, that her place in his car was made for her. As they drove off, Billy slipped his hand into hers, thumb rubbing against the smoothness of her skin.

"So, what's the grand tour all entail?" Chrissy asked, pushing back her hair.

"Not much," he admitted. "They rebuilt the mall. A new bar opened up where Radio Shack used to be. New subdivision popped up a few months ago."

"Fascinating," she drawled.

Billy flashed a smile. "You got any requests? Any nostalgic shit you wanna hit up?"

"Ice cream from the diner sounds fantastic."

“You got it.”

As they pulled up to a stop sign, Billy leaned over to kiss her. The familiar scent of his cologne hit her senses as he brushed his lips against hers, taking a taste of her again. His hand left hers, falling to the side of her head as his fingers laced in with her waves.

Chrissy flinched, drawing back by impulse and panic. Billy took back his hand, his face so devastated by realization of why she had jerked away that she couldn't bear to look at it.

To be fair, it wasn't just him. Anyone else who had tried pulling her hair or touched the back of her head when she wasn't expecting it got the same reaction. Sometimes much worse. But Billy didn't know that. She couldn't bear for him to think it was only him that elicited such a response.

“Sorry,” Chrissy said quietly, pressing herself back into the leather of the seat.

“That's my line, Chris,” Billy replied, sounding tired. “I didn't know.”

The car started to move again, humming as it continued down Cornwallis.

“So,” she said, trying to break the awkward silence, “where do you live now?”

“Loch Nora,” he said. “Bought myself a fancy house with the hush money the U-S-of-A graciously gave me.”

Chrissy gave him an incredulous look, eyebrows furrowing. “You live in *Loch Nora*?”

“Hell no. I'm renting a place over on Oak and Ninth.” He flashed her a cheeky grin. “You're still gullible as hell, you know that?”

“And you're still an asshole,” she said, lips forming a thin line. “I'm pretty sure they'd run you out of Loch Nora anyway.”

“You know they would,” Billy chuckled. “I'm too blue collar for those asswipes. They so much as see me working on my car, they'd call the

HOA.”

“I’m surprised it’s still running, honestly. Max said it was totaled.”

Billy shrugged. “It took a while to get her back to driving condition, but I wasn’t gonna give up on her. My dad actually called a buddy of his to help out, believe it or not.”

“Wow,” she said, actually surprised by the gesture. “Father of the year.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, taking in a deep breath. “He dropped the ball on everything else, might as well fix the one thing he could.”

She didn’t know how to answer that. Instead, Chrissy focused straight ahead. The passing trees and houses only brought another rush of nostalgia, a feeling of belonging in the car that she wasn’t sure would ever leave.

“Hey, open the glove compartment, will you?” he asked. “Got a present for you. Well, both of us. It’s in the pack of Reds.”

Chrissy gave him a questioning look as she clicked open the door. Inside sat a discarded pack of Reds, far less crumpled than a majority of the ones that had littered his room. As she opened it her eyes lit up. There were several pre-rolled joints, the smell sweeter than the shit she normally had to put up with.

“I got a guy who brings back the good stuff from California.” Billy shot her a grin, handing her his lighter. “Ladies first.”

“I’m surprised you don’t just go and get it yourself,” she stated, bringing the joint to her mouth. As she lit, inhaling deep, she tapped his arm. Billy leaned in, taking in her exhale, then her lips.

“I’ve been busy,” he said, giving her another kiss before turning back to the road. Quickly, he spotted the park, pulling over into the safety of the brush.

“Who do you get it from, then?” Chrissy asked, taking another hit. The effect was almost immediate, floating her into a comfortable high. “Ugh, what the hell have I been smoking all these years?”

“Mitch, actually.”

Chrissy’s head whipped around to look at him. “You’re not serious.”

Billy shrugged. “He’s actually pretty cool. Weird taste in music, but he’s fun to drink with.”

“I just... *how?*” she pressed, desperately trying to figure out this new development. “You looked like you wanted to kill him last time.”

“We got into a bar fight, believe it or not,” Billy said, giving a lazy smile. “Beat the shit out of each other until the owner threw us out. That dude can throw a fuckin’ punch. We ended up just talking on the sidewalk because we were too drunk to drive home.”

“And now he’s your dealer?”

“He’s a *friend*,” he said defensively. “Who also happens to sell me pot.”

Chrissy leaned back, letting out a frustrated groan. “No way. You can’t just be friends with other guys I’ve had sex with. It’s too weird.”

“I wouldn’t have any friends in this town then, would I?” he smirked, taking the joint from her. Chrissy shot him a glare, smacking his arm. “Ow! Jesus, you’re gonna bruise me one of these times.”

“You haven’t gotten any less mean since I last saw you,” she huffed. Her eyes trained on his face as he pulled another hit in, handing her the still-lit spliff. Heavy lidded eyes took her in, his mouth creasing into a tiny smile as she took her own hit.

“And you’re still a brat,” he said sweetly, leaning through the smoke to press his lips to her neck. “God, you’re cute when you pout. Gets me so hard.”

Chrissy felt a moan rumble in her throat, setting the joint in the ashtray between them. A quick glance downward confirmed what he had said; denim strained against the outline of his erection. She shifted to face him, feeling her slickness starting to form between unclothed legs. Billy did the same, letting out an appreciative murmur as she palmed him through his jeans. As his hand dove up

under her dress, his eyes lit up in surprise.

“No underwear?” he rasped, taking a hungry kiss from her. “Jesus, you really came prepared, didn’t you?”

“I’m not stupid. I knew what was gonna happen,” Chrissy frowned, pulling away slightly. “I have a couple pairs in my purse, not a big deal.”

“You brought them *with?*” Billy asked, a smug look on his face. “As what, a souvenir for me? Which ones?”

She smacking him lightly on the arm again. “To wear in case we went out, you pervert. And you wouldn’t recognize them. They’re new.”

He let out a low, wolfish whistle. “Shit, you’re really spoiling me today.”

“Yeah, well,” she grinned, giving him a peck on the lips. “Making up for lost time and all that.”

The soft, languid kisses of before gave way to hurried, desperate ones. Whimpers and soft curses punctuated them, hands roaming, exploring the terrain of each others’ bodies. She knew him and he knew her, but time had brought an unfamiliar feeling, exciting and new once more.

His touch was soft, more finessed and deliberate, working at her folds. She let out a gasp as a finger slipped into her, only to leave her in a whimpering mess a moment later. Billy gave a cocky smile, pressing his fingertips against her bud just enough to make her writhe against him.

Chrissy groaned as his hand left her, watching as he licked the slickness off one of his fingers. He leaned in, taking a kiss from her before sticking the other in her mouth to let her finish cleaning him off. She did so dutifully, eyes concentrated on him. His reaction was heavenly, a needy gasp as she twirled her tongue around his finger, coming off with an obscene pop.

Chrissy couldn’t stand it anymore. The seats creaked as she climbed on top of him. Billy pushed back the driver’s seat, giving them more

room.

“Not saying I don’t enjoy what’s going on right now,” he murmured, breath hitting her neck, “but I always thought this would be way more romantic. Candles and a bed or some shit.”

“When did you get so mushy?” Chrissy asked, her mouth forming a tiny smile.

“When did you stop?” he shot back, a playful grin on his face. “Condoms are in the usual spot, pretty girl.”

As she reached over to grab one, he slid his jeans down to his knees.

“See, you’re not wearing underwear either,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but I’m not the one wearing a fucking dress.”

A pout formed on her lips as she handed over the foil package. Billy rolled his eyes, sliding on the condom before pulling her close again.

“Quit sulking,” he said as he pressed fingers her hips, helping her steady her opening over his erection.

Chrissy let out a groan as she slid onto him, feeling herself alight. There was no space between them anymore, their bodies connected like one would reform an old habit.

She was obsessed, mesmerized by the way his lips parted as he watched her. How his hair fell in his face, sandy curls framing those ocean eyes of his. Chrissy leaned in, taking his jaw in her hands as she kissed him deeply, letting her teeth pull gently at his bottom lip.

A rumbling groan came from him as he gripped her hips harder, pushing her further down his cock. Chrissy let out a halted moan, louder than she had intended. It brought a wicked grin to Billy’s face.

“You’re so tight,” he panted. “When’s the last time you got any?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, pressing her forehead to his. “Like a month or two ago. I’ve been really busy.”

"Poor thing," Billy tutted, lips ghosting against hers as he undid the clasps at the front of her dress, sliding a hand under her bra. "We'll just have to make up for that, huh?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Please."

Chrissy let out a whimper as he bucked up into her, feeling her knees start to buckle with the anticipation of a climax. She hadn't expected it to come on so fast, but in his care it was hard not to fall into unrelenting pleasure without hesitation. The weed definitely helped.

"Christ, already?" he smirked, letting a finger rub against her nipple. "Don't remember you coming that fast."

"You feel so good inside me," Chrissy murmured, letting out a squeak as he pinched at the pink bud. "It's hard not to."

As Billy continued his teasing, she kept up her lustful dance on his cock. Riding him like it was the only thing keeping her grounded to this reality; he was gravity and she was bound to him.

His thighs were just as thick and muscular as before, as if all the complaining of muscle loss in letters had been a lie. Everything about his was toned and golden, like nothing but the ink on his skin and the length of his hair had changed. She wondered how much she changed, what he thought of her appearance now.

Chrissy's thoughts were interrupted by a sting and a sharp *CLAP* against her ass. She let out a yelp, digging her nails into his shoulders.

"You like that?" he smirked, tongue tracing his bottom lip.

Chrissy nodded. She was so close, it gnawed at her. Picking up the pace, Chrissy let out halted whimpers, desperate to find release. Another smack to her bottom before Billy's fingers dug into her hips, watching in a dazed awe at her ferocity.

Finally, it became too much. Fingers meandered to her clit, rubbing against the sensitive bud as Billy continued to buck up into her.

"*Fuck*," he whispered, eyes flitting from her hand against her clit back

to her face. "You gonna come for me again, pretty girl?"

"Mhm," she murmured, pressing her forehead against his. "Just for you."

It didn't take long for the wave to finally crash into her. Chrissy let out a strangled moan, clenching around him as her free hand gripped his arm. Billy slowed down his thrusts, watching as she turned to mush in his arms.

"You okay?" He gave her a shit-eating grin.

Chrissy leaned her head against his shoulder, giving a whine as he thrust into her a few more times.

"Yeah," she said softly. "Just tired."

"Poor thing," Billy tutted, pressing a kiss into her neck. "I'm close, just let me do the work."

His hips snapped up into hers, eliciting a raspy cry from the brunette. It was a barrage of thrusts so intense that Chrissy could barely form a coherent thought. It felt like a cycle. The harder he slammed into her, the louder she moaned; the louder she was, the more fervent Billy became.

Before she knew it, he was coming, giving short, lazy thrusts as he sighed out a groan into her chest. She made no move to get off him, reveling in their joined bodies after such an absence. Billy seemed to be taking it in as well, clutching at her hips and back as if she would float away without him anchoring her. His face was buried into her breasts; warm, jagged breaths hitting her chest.

Chrissy brought his face out of her bosom, pressing a soft kiss to his lips. Hand pressed into the tanned flesh of her breasts, Billy giving an appreciative murmur as he tweaked at her nipple.

"You have no idea," he said, "how much I missed these."

Chrissy gave a laugh, biting at her lower lip as eyes traced over his face. He looked more mature, more chiseled in the face. Tired, worn down by whatever life had thrown at him the past three years. Still

so ruggedly handsome with the longest lashes she'd seen on a person.

"No one's been as obsessed with them since," she teased.

"Good." Billy let out a sigh.

With a grunt, Chrissy lifted herself off him, silently mourning the loss of such physical closeness for now. Leather squeaked as she climbed back to the passenger seat, redoing the clasps on the front of her dress.

"You still want that ice cream?" Billy murmured.

A fit of giggles erupted out of Chrissy, back pressing into the leather seat.

"Yeah," she managed to say. "Ice cream sounds great right now."

12. time is on your side

The Camaro slowed to a stop in front of a brick side-by-side duplex. It wasn't very old, built shortly after the war. There was a well-kept lawn and shrubbery hugging the covered porch shared by him and his neighbor framed the twin wood doors.

He could say it wasn't much, but it would be a lie. It was more than he had ever expected to find in this town. Roomy, a shared backyard and garage, plus a basement for any crap he couldn't find a place for yet. It felt like a home, something he hadn't felt he had in a long time.

"It's cute," Chrissy spoke up, gazing at the tan, weathered brick. "Well-loved."

"Yeah, well," he said with a shrug, "it's nicer looking inside."

The scorpion keychain twirled around his finger as the blonde shut his door, walking over to the passenger's side. He opened her door — *playing the gentleman as long as he could stand to* — and waited for her to move.

"I'm still tired," she complained, giving him a pout. "Besides, I told you I'd only come back if you were strong enough to carry me."

Billy's expression went slack, rolling his eyes. "You were *serious*?"

"As the plague." The pout turned to a devilish grin.

With a sigh, Billy pulled her out of the car. He hoisted her up onto his shoulder, gripping her legs as the fabric of her dress bunched around her knees. He'd been benching more than her weight the past few months, and for that he was thankful.

"BILLY!" she shrieked, gripping his shirt for dear life.

"What, you expected me to carry you bridal-style or something?" Billy grinned, adjusting her on his shoulder. "Get real, Sunshine."

As he made his way to his front porch, Chrissy continued to squeal and wriggle in his grasp. He couldn't help but let out a chuckle. A quick swat to her bottom only generated a string of curses and shrieks from the brunette.

Eyes flitted to his neighbor's side of the porch. Sure enough, Miriam Fischer was settling outside on her wicker chair, giving him a wry smile as her eyebrows raised. She was the owner of the duplex, a sweet old thing that brought over leftovers and talked on and on about the neighbors.

"Hey, Midge," he greeted.

"Billy," she nodded. "This one's certainly got a mouth on her. She got a name?"

"Chrissy." He couldn't help but beam before nudging Chrissy, who had stopped fighting him. "Chris, this is Midge."

"Hi," came the tiny reply from over his shoulder.

"Hi there." Midge gave a little wave. "Don't let him pick on you too much."

"I won't," Chrissy answered.

"She will," Billy said with a cheeky wink. The door clicked behind him, leaving Midge to shake her head at the nonsense she had just witness.

"You're such an ass," Chrissy pouted as he set her down. A smack landed squarely on his bicep before she turned around. He could tell by her silence, she was not expecting the room before her.

"It's so *clean*," she said in hushed tones, like it was a secret she couldn't keep inside.

Billy's eyebrows furrowed. "Yeah, it usually is."

"No, but it's *clean* in here."

"Your point?" He was starting to get irritated by the emphasis.

“The last time I was in your bedroom it was a disaster,” Chrissy said, setting down her purse on his coffee table. “This is... holy *shit*. You’re like a whole new man.”

“I don’t know if I should feel insulted or not by that,” he remarked, coming up behind her to wrap his arms around her torso. “You want a tour or are you gonna keep drooling over the fact there’s no cups and shit lying around?”

“Tour, please,” she said brightly. He planted a kiss on her cheek before letting go.

If he was honest, it wasn’t much to look at, but Chrissy took it all in with glee and wonderment. He remembered she still was living with her dad and stepmom, so having a space all his own was a magical goal she was still hoping to achieve.

The living room, a small — *described as ‘cozy’ in the ad he’d found it in* — kitchen, Max’s makeshift room with his weight set in the corner, and a small bathroom made up the first floor. The only thing he could vaguely describe as a mess was Max’s room, with her things littering the unmade air mattress and a few crumpled empty packs of Marlboro Reds on the side table. Chevy’s cat tree, a gift from Susan, sat under the window.

“Where’s the cat?” Chrissy asked, looking square at the carpeted piece of furniture.

“Hell if I know,” Billy answered with a little shrug. “She’s kind of skittish around new people. I’m sure she’ll come out eventually.”

“Frank’s like that too.” She clicked her tongue before turning to him with a bright smile. “Where’s your room, then?”

“Was saving it for last,” he said back with a smile.

Billy took her hand leading her to the stairs to the second floor. Creaky, annoying bastards, but they at least felt safer to walk up than the basement set.

“Watch your step,” he warned. “They’re kind of steep.”

"I know how stairs work," she said dryly.

Billy only rolled his eyes as he ascended the stairs.

"Main bathroom is here," he said, pushing open the door to the bathroom. The sink was littered with products, a towel hanging haphazardly from the rack.

"Ah, okay," Chrissy grinned, stepping in slightly. "So *this* is where the mess is."

"Organized chaos," he said simply. "My room's way cleaner. Promise."

She gave him a skeptical smile, letting him lead her to the master bedroom.

"Wow," she said softly.

He couldn't help but beam. He had refreshed the paint on the walls and tore up the shag carpeting himself, with Midge's gleeful permission. A queen-size bed replaced his old one, the frame secondhand and refinished with some help from one of his coworkers at the garage. Even a few of his old posters now had frames, at the insistence of the women in his life. Something about them being more 'presentable'.

"A queen bed?" Chrissy asked. Before he could answer, she walked in, belly-flopping on the bed. "Color me impressed."

"I was always jealous you had one," Billy said. "Way more room to spread out."

"It was a hand-me-down from my parents," she replied, her voice slightly muffled from the comforter. "God, it even *smells* clean."

"I changed my sheets just for you," he teased, flopping next to her.

"I would fucking hope so."

Billy could only laugh, letting his fingers skim the curve of her back.

She looked up at him. Those soft hazel eyes surrounded by a smattering of freckles turned his heart into a drumline. He had thought about them often, imagined them in the early mornings and in the midst of trysts. Spent so much time and care not to forget the way they looked, the honey enveloping flecks of olive.

He took to her lips, pressing gently against them in a softer embrace than before. A soft murmur came from Chrissy as she returned the gesture, shifting to close the space between them. There was something so wonderful about the slowness of it all; no hurry to take one another in. It was almost peaceful, meditative in the way they exchanged kisses. She was a sweetness on his lips he couldn't help but be addicted to.

Slowly, the clasps on her dress came undone, the fabric sliding off her as a masterpiece being revealed to the world. Billy drank it up, plush curves to her hips that hadn't been there before. A reclining Venus come alive, pressed into the steel blue comforter. Impossible to divert his eyes from, doe eyes wandering over his own face, daring and far from demure.

The forest green shirt quickly pulled over his head, discarded somewhere on the hardwood. He could feel her eyes trace the raised scar tissue, a map of his pain and determination to live despite it. Billy looked away, pulling off the rest of his clothes.

"Do they ever hurt?" Chrissy asked, face failing to mask the sadness.

"Yeah, sometimes," he admitted. "Mostly when it rains or it's cold."

"Poor baby," she murmured. Slim fingers followed the curve of a scar on his left flank, impossibly gentle as if any pressure would burst him apart at the seams.

"Hey, don't worry about me, okay?" Billy's face softened, rubbing a thumb against her hip.

"I can't help it." Chrissy gave him a look before her eyes flitted down to his hand.

With a kiss, she gave a murmur against his lips.

"I want to make you forget about it for a while, then," he said huskily.

Slowly, his kisses trailed down her neck, stopping at the edge of her bra where the soft flesh of her breasts peeked out. Deft hands undid the undergarment, tossing it to the floor as he let his mouth envelope a rosy nipple. Chrissy's response was pure sin, a halting 'ah!' as he sucked at the hard bud. His hand flew to one of hers, grasping it so desperately that his knuckles nearly turned white.

All he wanted was to tease and suck and taste every bit of her being. To memorize her again to not forget one bit of her.

"Jesus," he muttered, taking in the sight before him.

She was already glistening, rosy and needy for him. The knot in his stomach tightened; there was no way Billy could hold back anymore, even if he wanted to continue teasing her.

Taking his first taste of her quenched a deep thirst in him he hadn't realized he had. His tongue ran slow up her folds, baby blues locked onto her face to gauge Chrissy's reaction. God, it was beautiful. Primal. Lost already in pleasure, she writhed against his face. Gone was the girl who had been hesitant when he dove between her legs. She beckoned him, practically laid out a welcome mat for his face against her cunt.

Billy took it as a signal to take his time. Let her drown in the feeling of his tongue against her, lips leaving sloppy, lewd kisses in between the attention given to her clit.

Her fingers gripping his curls sent electricity down his spine, taking care to keep his pace steady. Chrissy squirmed as he let one of his fingers enter her, curling gently against the ridges of her walls.

"Oh my god," she said, raspy and delirious. "Don't stop."

Her noises grew louder and more frequent as he pushed his digit in and out, never letting up the steady rhythm of his tongue against her. Billy felt a throaty moan leave his lips, honeyed slickness dripping down his chin.

As the last bits of her climax washed over her, Billy took a peek back at Chrissy's face. She was floating away to some far-off place, tethered to reality only by his touch. Euphoric. Billy liked to think she hadn't felt this way in anyone else's care. Whatever surprises she had in her arsenal now he could match; time had allowed him to hone his craft. All for her.

"You okay?" He asked, giving a smirk.

"Fuck," was the only answer she gave. Breathily, still in the clouds. Wonderful.

There was something about it that lit a fire in him. A singular kiss pressed to her thigh before he went back to his meal.

Chrissy's response couldn't have goaded him on any more. A whine left her lips, hips bucking into his face with need. If she wasn't finished, neither was he. Sucking gently on her clit, Billy slid two fingers into her, the noises as he fucked her with them wholly obscene.

His own hips dragged against the sheets as he gripped her leg harder with his free hand. He'd later find spots of precum on the sheets, his own body desperate for sweet relief inside her. Billy couldn't remember the last time he had such a visceral reaction to a woman's moans.

It was a dizzying spell, thighs pressed against the sides of his head. A jagged whimper with the arch of her back. A potion slippery and sweet on his lips and fingers. A love spell, he mused. It seemed near impossible to love her any more than he did in that moment.

He could pull a few more orgasms from her, Billy was sure of it. But his own needs and selfishness became unignorable. There was a tiny part of him that thought if he wasn't inside her in the next few minutes, he would die.

Slowly, he positioned himself closer to her, erection dragging against the wetness that had graced his lips only seconds before. Chrissy let out a whine, hips pressing against his as her hand snaked up his chest, drawing over his scars with a light touch.

He couldn't help but think she was perfect and beautiful in his hands. Soft, delicate. He never wanted to break her again.

"I love you," he murmured.

"I love you, too," she smiled back, almost no beat between their words.

Seeing her beneath him, he could almost cry. Bare flesh, smooth and far more tan than when he last laid eyes on her, her chest rising and falling in quick breaths. It was his to touch, to taste and worship again, for however long she let him.

"You're beautiful," Billy couldn't help but say, as if the knowledge was too much weight to bear as a secret.

She pulled him into a kiss. Every synapse fired at once, the circuitry of his being behaving as though it was complete again. To feel what it had lost for years.

"I think you're beautiful, too," Chrissy whispered.

"Handsome would be a better word," he grinned softly into her kiss.

"No, not this time," she breathed, letting out a soft murmur. "I don't know how to describe it. You're just... beautiful. All of you."

He couldn't help but let his grin widen. "You've been watching too many soaps, pretty girl."

Lifting her legs around his hips, he slipped into her, letting out an audible breath. Like tucking into warm velvet. Chrissy whimpered as he slid in and out of her slickness, hips bucking against his own to push that much further in.

He wanted to take his time with her. Make her feel all of him, and in return take in everything she had to give. Pull those sweet moans from her, breathy and needy. Kiss her until the sun rose again. Their tryst in the Camaro was only the beginning in their quest to make up for lost time. Billy wished he could pause time, let them win back those years.

“Billy?” Chrissy said softly between halted breaths.

“Hm?” he murmured as he thrust deep into her. It was enough to elicit a groan from her. With a devilish smile, he thrust into her again, satisfied by the repeat reaction.

“I love you,” she managed to say, gripping at his arm as he continued. “*Fuck*, I love you.”

Billy leaned in close, pressing his weight on top of the brunette as he sunk into her again. A few kisses pressed to her neck, then her lips. His body buzzed as she hummed against his lips.

“I love you too,” he murmured.

He could swear she was golden, shining with a thin sheen of sweat and glow. Somehow wholly in focus yet blurred around the edges. Shining so bright he couldn’t find it in him to look away even though it may blind him forever.

She tightened around his length, body tensing as she came with a nearly inaudible moan. That was something he always liked about her. Her quest to find release was often loud, sometimes animalistic, but once she found it? Quiet, as if Chrissy had turned inwards so that her bliss would remain all her own. Introspective, in a way.

As he watched her, keeping his pace, a thought crossed his mind.

I never want to be without this girl again.

He couldn’t help but think back at how stupid he had been. How their youth and naivety and fear had nearly ruined something so precious. How goddamn lucky he was, that the universe had allowed that fierce love to stay stalwart as they matured.

Chrissy pulled him closer, her legs pressing against her torso as he went deeper. A quieter moan left her as she tightened around him, his hips snapping against hers in a frenzied chase for his own end. A few more thrusts and white hot light came over him as he came. Their ragged breaths mingled, strands of his hair sticking to the sheen on her chest.

He didn't want to leave her. It was becoming a louder desire, to keep this physical closeness to prove to his brain that she wasn't just a fantasy. But he did. Billy lifted himself off Chrissy, taking in the sight of his spent lover. Still golden. Still utter perfection.

As he lay next to her, he found Chrissy buried against him. She gave a shudder, then another. At first Billy thought she might be cold, trying to find the crumpled comforter. As he shifted to find it, he saw her face.

She was crying.

All at once his body seemed to sink from the floating high back down to the darkest depths he had once inhabited.

"Chris?" he asked, tongue feeling like sandpaper. No answer, just a tiny sniffle as she gripped him closer. "Hey, what's the matter?"

"I'm just..." Chrissy trailed off, letting out a shaky breath. "I'm okay. A little overwhelmed. Like, it doesn't feel *real*, y'know?"

"Oh, pretty girl," he hummed into hair. "It's as real as it's ever gonna be."

A tiny sigh left her as she sank even closer. Billy silently made a promise to her as warm breath hit his chest. Never again would he hurt her in such a way to make her cry. He'd take care of her, protect her to the best of his ability.

"Do you have aspirin?" she asked softly.

"Yeah, why?"

"Just feeling sore." With a small smile, she brought him to her lips. "And I know I'm gonna feel more sore tomorrow."

With great reluctance, Chrissy finally hefted herself out of bed and

shuffled to the bathroom. There lay the organized chaos Billy had noted before, a treasure trove of information for her to study as she cleaned herself up. He still used Aqua Net, still had an array of colognes and aftershaves for whatever mood suited him.

Here he was, a functional adult. Buying his own toothpaste. Hanging fucking hand towels on the rack. Part of Chrissy felt inadequate, too childish for him in the current state she was in. He had settled into a fully independent life, and she was still deciding where she wanted to live.

Chrissy opened the medicine cabinet, her gaze shifting over the contents. A cluster of orange pill bottles caught her attention. She leaned in closer, turning the labels to read them. Valium. Prozac. Amitriptyline. Prazosin.

Her heart sank. How had she not heard about any of this in the years they talked? Did he not trust her enough to know he was still in pain, physically *and* mentally? Chrissy wondered if he'd ever tell her himself. Maybe she would have to start the conversation.

Not now. Right now, she was concerned with just enjoying his company. Letting him be unabashedly happy.

With a sigh, she scanned the contents again, finding the aspirin. As she went to grab it, a tube of lipstick caught her eye. Her fingers gripped it instead,

"You find the aspirin?" Billy's voice rang out, growing closer before settling beside her. Chrissy glanced at him, noting he was still bare-chested but had thrown on some boxers while he had waited for her to return.

"Yeah, but I found this too." Chrissy flashed the lipstick before popping the cover off to take a closer look.

"Oh," Billy said simply, giving a quick glance at the lipstick tube.

"Ooh, pretty," she commented as she stared at the deep red. "Whose is this?"

"Teresa's."

“Teresa?” Chrissy repeated.

“Yeah. She, uh, hasn’t been around for a few weeks.”

Chrissy raised her eyebrows, giving him a doubtful look. “A few weeks?”

“Okay, more like a month,” he admitted. “I said something dumb and she got pissed at me.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” she shrugged, twisting the tube back down and replacing the cap. With a tiny sigh, she tossed the lipstick in the trash. “Such a waste, it was a really nice lipstick.”

Billy leaned against the doorframe. “You could’ve taken it.”

“And risk getting herpes? No thanks.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You saying I have herpes?”

Chrissy couldn’t hold back a snicker, grabbing the bottle of aspirin she had originally came for.

“I never said that,” she grinned, “but I’m surprised you haven’t had every VD known to man by now.”

“Right back at you,” he shot back, a playful smirk on his face. “What with all the opportunities to catch ‘em while you travel.”

She shook out two pills, tossing them in her mouth before taking a drink from the faucet. Giving him a bored look, Chrissy pushed past the blonde to make her way to the bedroom to find her discarded clothing.

“There’s a lot less opportunities than you think,” she sighed, picking up her dress and bra off the floor. Billy made his way past her, digging through his closet to produce a t-shirt.

“Here” he said, handing the shirt to her before flopping back on his bed.

“Thanks,” she said with a small smile.

“So, anyone in particular?” he asked as she pulled the shirt on.

Chrissy turned to look at him, setting her clothes on top of his dresser. She climbed back onto the bed next to him, letting out a noise as he pulled her close. Lips pressed against her forehead, dispelling her anxiety that he was fishing for information that would make him jealous.

“Not really,” she admitted, hazel eyes meeting his blue ones. “A few pilots. There was a guy in Spain I saw a few times. Nobody who stuck.”

“Mm.”

“So Teresa,” she said slowly, pushing her mussed up hair away from her face. “Was she...?”

Chrissy watched as he blew out a sigh. For a moment, she wondered if asking was the wrong move, if she *really* wanted to know the extent of another girl’s presence in his life.

“She passed the time,” Billy replied, giving her a heavy-lidded look. “Only reason I kept seeing her is that she gives a hell of a blowjob.”

Chrissy wrinkled her nose. “Ew.”

He shrugged. “You asked. I’m not gonna lie.”

She let out a grimace as she buried her face in his chest, feeling his hand squeeze her side.

“You okay?” Billy asked softly.

“Yeah,” she answered, just as quietly. “Just thought you’d be playing the field more, not sticking to one girl.”

“It’s Hawkins. Not much of a field to play, Chris.”

She didn’t answer. Suddenly she felt very stupid, face hot and heart thudding away. It was one thing to say years ago that there was no hard feelings, but now that she was hearing it first hand it felt worse. Like a mistake. She couldn’t fathom how Billy felt knowing she had

done the same thing, finding release with other people. He shifted, taking her chin in his hand and breaking her train of thought.

“Hey, I told you already. It’s been done for a while. And now that you’re back...” he trailed off, looking away before blue eyes fixed on her again. “I mean, if this is gonna be a regular thing, you coming back—”

“I think so,” she said meekly.

“Then it’s just you. *Only* you now.” There was a smallness to his voice, boyish despite the deep tone. “I don’t want anyone else.”

“I don’t either,” Chrissy whispered, curling her fingers around his hand. “Billy?”

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

The way he beamed at her would have turned her into a pile of mush if it was any brighter. “Love you too.”

“I think about you every time I fly to California,” she blurted out. “I felt so guilty being there without you the first time, I didn’t even go out. It just didn’t seem fair.”

“I still wanna go, you know,” he smiled, giving her hand a peck. “You need a local to give you the full experience.”

“You still need to come to Florida, too.”

“Oh, I plan on it,” Billy said, giving a grunt as he stretched. “I need to find out what’s so great down there that you stayed for so long.”

There was a silence. She hadn’t meant to stay away for so long. The more people around her brought it up, the more guilt piled on her chest, slowly burying her in it.

“Stay,” he said suddenly, voice low. “For tonight.”

“Billy...” Chrissy couldn’t help but hesitate.

“Please.”

She couldn't hide the hurt and fear that seemed to overwhelm her in the moment, nor could Billy ignore it. That same devastation from earlier blanketed his beautiful face.

“You don't trust me,” he stated, pained.

“No,” she rushed, pressing her hand to his face. “No, Billy. I'm just... I don't know how to explain it, okay? I just get afraid sometimes I'm gonna wake up and it's not going to be you.”

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath, running a hand over his mouth. Chrissy's breath hitched, hand slipping down his chest as tears started to prick at her eyes again. She hated that even years after the fact, there was fear lingering.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I know it doesn't make sense now, but —”

“Don't be.” Billy's voice was gentle, a tinge of hurt coating his words. “Christina, I promise, I won't hurt you. Never again, okay? But if you want to go home, I'm not gonna stop you.”

“Can I just... decide later?” came her timid answer.

Those ocean eyes bore through her, seemingly looking for anything he could say or do to convince her of her safety. A shiver went down her spine as he sighed, nodding as his hand trailed down her arm.

“You hungry?” he asked, changing the subject.

She could only nod as she buried her face in his chest again.

Waxed paperboard boxes full of the remnants of a Chinese takeout feast spread across the oak coffee table. From his tv, Al and Peggy Bundy squabbled while the studio audience chortled along.

On Billy's couch however, was a sweeter, quieter scene. Chrissy's head sat in his lap as she opened a fortune cookie. His hand brushed at the waves framing her face. A singular snap, and her hand reached

up to his face, offering him a piece of the cookie. Absentmindedly, he let her fingers place it between his lips, hearing a soft giggle from below.

“You're real cute, you know that?” Billy smiled, letting her take his hand in her own.

A soft kiss pressed into his hand before she answered. “I try harder for you.”

The sound of soft padding followed by a ‘brrt’ noise made his eyebrows fly up. Chevy, now a far cry from the underweight kitten he had found six months ago, was eyeing up the leftover food with round, gold eyes.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Billy warned.

Chrissy looked over to where he was currently staring, eyes widening as she sat up slowly.

“She’s so freakin’ cute,” she gushed.

Chevy put a paw up on the coffee table, eyes shifting from Billy to Chrissy.

“I said stop it, Chev.”

She jumped up. Another soft rumble of a meow came from her, quickly sniffing at the container of lo mein. Billy leaned forward, swatting at her to shoo the calico away.

“This is my food,” he said sternly. “Go.”

Chrissy burst into a fit of giggles as the cat refused to move, instead laying down while slowly closing her eyes. Careful to not scare off Chevy, she leaned forward, offering her hand to the current queen of his household. To his surprise, Chevy sniffed her fingers, devoid of any apprehension she had shown to anyone else besides Max and Susan.

Jesus, she’s gonna be following Chrissy around like a shadow by tomorrow morning, he thought dryly. That’ll be one more of us missing

her when she leaves.

Chrissy had beckoned him back to his bedroom not long after. Abandoned the relatively permissive nature Billy had come to expect in their romps, taking full command of the bedroom. Turned his teasing back on him tenfold; brought him to the point of *begging* for her. Between the urgent kisses lay proclamations of love, until bliss found them both and both lay spent in each others' arms. It wasn't long before Billy watched as sleep took Chrissy.

The occasional glow of headlights from passing cars lit the silhouettes curled into each other. He couldn't help but fight sleep for a little longer just to feel the rise and fall of her chest against him. Even in the darkness of his room, he could make out the peaceful expression on Chrissy's face. Forgotten in sleep were her fears from earlier, left was only the ingrained need to be as close as humanly possible to him.

He couldn't help but hold her tighter, burying his face in the soft waves of her hair. It all seemed so dream-like. How many times had he awoke, grasping for her in the night to no avail? And now she was here, she was *real*, and Billy wanted nothing more than to pause this moment to live in forever.

The space next to Chrissy was empty.

It took mere moments for panic to set in, for the fight-or-flight adrenaline to slowly creep into her system. She sat up quickly, hair a tangled mess around her face. In the dim light of the morning, obscured by the venetian blinds, she could see no other being in the room.

Relief came in the form of the muffled sound of a toilet flushing in the next room. Her gaze shot to the door as it opened, Billy pushing back curls from his tired face. In a moment, he seemed to realize from the residual panic on her face what had gone through her mind.

“Shit,” he said. “*Shit*. I’m sorry, Chris. I swear, you were dead asleep and I just needed to take a leak. I didn’t want you to wake up without me there.”

As he slipped back onto the bed, Chrissy brought him into a fierce hug. Warm skin against her own settled her fears, the intensity of his returned embrace settling the thudding of her heart. All he emanated was comfort.

“You okay?” he whispered to her.

“I will be.” A breath, shakier than she was comfortable with, left her lips. “I’ll be okay, promise.”

They sat in silence, wrapped in each others arms until Chrissy felt the tension in her body finally melt away. Back down went their bodies to the mattress, limbs tangled together.

“Your hair is a mess,” Billy said with a grin. “You always look like this when you wake up?”

“Unfortunately,” Chrissy said, pursing her lips. “You don’t look so hot yourself. What time is it?”

Billy peeked at the alarm clock next to his bed. “Just about 6:30.”

Chrissy let out a groan. “It’s too damn early.”

“My alarm was gonna go off soon, anyway,” Billy shrugged, giving a kiss to her cheek.

“Mm, so you’re not gonna stay in bed with me all day?” She asked with a fake pout. “Bummer.”

He couldn't help but let out a chuckle. Chrissy beamed at him, the panic of earlier now fully gone from her being. To be honest, she would have loved to spend the day lounging in bed with him. No interruptions or awkwardness now that they had reacquainted themselves with each other.

“You’re welcome to stay here while I’m at work,” he offered, propping himself up on an elbow.

“And what? Clean your house to keep occupied?” she asked sarcastically, giving him a doubtful look.

Billy laughed. “If you wanna play housewife, be my guest.”

“Ew.”

“Have dinner in the oven when I come home, greet me at the door wearing only a smile...” he continued with a shit-eating grin on his face.

Chrissy felt a pout form on her face, hand smacking against his chest with an audible *CLAP*. Billy only laughed as he fell onto his back, the bed shaking as he hit the mattress. She wasn’t necessarily opposed to the idea — *especially the last bit* — but it wasn’t in the itinerary this visit.

“I have places to be today,” she announced, watching his gleeful face. The way his eyes crinkled as he smiled melted any annoyance that had built up.

“Really,” Billy said, brushing a few wild curls from his tan face. “And where’s that?”

“Fireman’s picnic. I promised my family I’d go.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“I’m seeing Annette and Steve.” Chrissy paused, lips puckering out as she thought. “I’m free the last day I’m here, though. I can stay the night if you’ll take me to the airport.”

“Sure.” He rolled over to his stomach, taking in a deep breath as he closed his eyes. “Fuck. Wish I was going to that picnic thing with you instead of working.”

Chrissy pressed a kiss into his shoulder, letting her fingers draw lazy circles around the tattooed rose on his arm. “When do you start?”

“Eight.”

She couldn’t help but make a face. “Then why the hell is your alarm

set so early?"

Billy buried his face back into his pillow, giving a soft groan.

"I try to work out before I go in," he said, voice muffled. "Don't feel like it today, though."

"I can think of a different kind of workout you can do," Chrissy mused, toying with his hair.

An appreciative murmur came from the pillow, his body sinking deeper into relaxation as she continued to play with the sandy curls. Without warning, an arm shot out, grabbing her close as he shifted to face her again. Chrissy let out a squeal, palms flattening against his chest as he crawled on top of her.

"You're gonna regret that offer, sunshine," Billy grinned, tongue tracing the ridges of his teeth. "You're gonna be *way* more sore than I am when we're done."

13. taking it in stride

It had been sweltering up until today. Too hot to enjoy anything but shaved ice and overpriced sodas, bodies huddled under whatever shade in vain. If she had been smarter, Max would've avoided the fireman's picnic altogether yesterday, but Hawkins had little to offer and she was keen on taking anything to quell her boredom. Today, at least, there was a good local band playing and the promise of being whipped around on the Zipper made braving the lingering humidity worthwhile.

Lucas and Will were rattling on about the new cabinets at the arcade, Max half-listening as she tossed the paper cone from her shaved ice in an overflowing trashcan. The bustle of the fairground seemed to slowly mute as Max's gaze focused on a singular person in the crowd. Everything felt unreal suddenly, floaty and yet heavy with a weight only dreams had brought before.

Billy had told her, of course, calling during a smoke break at work. Couldn't keep the news to himself, telling Max straight up that Chrissy was back in town for a few days. That she'd be at the fireman's picnic.

"What?" she had said, a little too loudly. Her mom gave her a look before turning back to her book. "How did you find out?"

"Saw her at the pool during my shift," Billy had told her, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world. "She came by my place after I finished work."

"So you two..." Max had trailed off. "You guys are good?"

"Yeah, we're good." He paused. "Figuring everything out still. Just thought since you were talking about that picnic crap, you'd wanna know."

Even with that knowledge, Max still couldn't believe it. Gone so long, yet here Chrissy DiMartino was, in the flesh. Shining and vibrant,

laughing without a care in the world. Tucked neatly between her family, all of them bathing in her high spirits.

"Max, you okay?" Lucas asked, setting a hand on her shoulder.

"Hm? What?"

"You look like you saw a ghost."

I might as well have. Max perked up again, giving him and Will a big smile. It was just the three of them at the moment. El and Mike had wandered off, per usual, and Dustin promised to show up later after a very important call with Suzie.

"I'm fine," Max said, giving him a playful punch in the arm. "I actually just saw a friend of mine I wanna say hi to. I'll meet you by the band?"

Lucas gave a shrug. "Sure. Just don't take too long."

She watched as the two boys shuffled off, debating what food to grab from the stands littered around the fairground. Max turned her attention to her task at hand.

"Chrissy!" The word felt foreign in her mouth, long since retired. "Hey, Chrissy!"

She turned around. Freckled and still sporting a bouncy bob of a haircut, she looked every bit as youthful as Max remembered. A bright yellow ribbon sat tied in a bow atop her head, a surefire way to draw anyone's attention to herself.

Chrissy's face brightened, a thousand-watt smile spreading across her face. She turned to her mother, giving her a pat on the shoulder before making her way through the throng of people towards Max.

"Max!" she called out, still grinning. Her name sounded like honey on Chrissy's lips, enough to make Max break out in an equally wide grin as she met the brunette in the middle.

She couldn't help but pull Chrissy into a fierce hug, returned with equal vigor and warmth. Her embrace was comparable to being back

home, floating endlessly in the warmth of the ocean.

“Shit, how did you get taller?” Chrissy asked, pulling away to get a good look at Max.

It was true. One last growth spurt had Max shooting up to a comfortable 5’7”, taller than most of the women she knew. Her father was gangly, so the extra few inches of height wasn’t much of a surprise to her. It certainly helped make her look older, which came in handy with some of the shenanigans she got up to.

“Eating my greens,” Max said, giving a cheeky grin. “That or you shrunk.”

Chrissy rolled her eyes, smile still playing on pink painted lips. “That’s a possibility. You here with anyone?”

“Yeah!” she chirped, sticking her hands in her pockets. “Everybody but Dustin. No clue where El and Mike are though. They kinda wander off a lot.”

“Still attached at the hip, huh?”

“Annoyingly so.” Max paused, cocking her head to the side. “I got your postcard from Austria, by the way. How was it?”

“It was gorgeous,” Chrissy gushed, pulling out her pack of cigarettes from her back pocket. “Seriously, you would love it there. It looks like a fairy tale.”

“Can I bum one?” she asked, nodding to the pack.

Chrissy’s face contorted into dismay before offering the pack to the redhead. Max gingerly took a cigarette, placing it between her lips as Chrissy did the same.

“When the hell did you start smoking?”

Max shrugged. “I dunno. After I started high school?”

“Bet your mom loves that.” Chrissy lit her cigarette before handing off the lighter. Max immediately recognized it as one of Billy’s, covered

with tiny patterns in permanent marker. They had sat around one evening doodling on a bunch of his shit, blazed out of their minds and full of too many visual ideas to ever complete them all.

“She can bite me.”

“Max!” Chrissy exclaimed, bursting into laughter. Max couldn’t help but fall into a fit of giggles as she blew out smoke.

“I’m planning on taking like, all college-level courses my senior year,” she protested. “And I’ve never gotten so much as a speeding ticket. She thinks I’m gonna be just like Billy was.”

Chrissy blew out a sigh of smoke, looking up to the near-cloudless sky.

“There’s no way you’d get even a *fraction* as bad as Billy used to be,” she finally said. “You put me and him to shame.”

“So you’ll buy me a beer?” Max said slyly as they started to walk towards an empty patch of grass near the canopies.

That got another laugh out of Chrissy. “Maybe later. Tell me how you’ve been and I’ll decide whether you deserve one.”

As they settled on the grass, Max noticed two things. One was how utterly relaxed Chrissy was, a far cry from the last time she had seen the older girl. How comfortable in her skin she was, content to be back in her hometown for the moment. The second was how different she felt sitting next to Chrissy, no longer the snot-nosed kid trying to seem interesting to her older brother’s girlfriend. Like they were nearly equals, understanding coming in the form of her newfound maturity.

“So spill,” Chrissy said, leaning back on her hand. “Catch me up here. All I know is you’re apparently a model student and a delinquent at the same fucking time.”

Max leaned forward, flicking ash off her cigarette as she shrugged. “Not much to tell.”

“You and Lucas still together?”

“Nah,” she said. “I mean, he’s still one of my best friends, but he’s so *immature*, you know?”

“Yeah,” Chrissy said, fingers drumming against her thigh. “I totally get it. Boys are so stupid at that age. Maybe when he wises up it’ll be different.”

It would be nice. Max couldn’t deny the residual feelings for him, always secretly holding out for a change in the boy that would make her want to try again. Lucas was a good person, giving and attentive, but it wasn’t enough to hold them together amid the constant arguing and drifting interests. Maybe that’s how Chrissy had felt about Billy towards the end.

“Billy said you stayed at his place last night,” she commented, taking another drag.

Chrissy gave a small frown. “When did you hear this? You guys talkin’ about me behind my back?”

“He called on his break.” Max paused, blowing a stray lock of hair from her face. “Haven’t heard him sound that perky in a while.”

“He’s so mellow now. It’s weird.”

“Mellow?” she repeated, giving a snort. “*Billy*? Fat fuckin’ chance. He’s still a huge asshole.”

“I never said he wasn’t one,” Chrissy laughed. “He just seems calmer.”

“Yeah, well, not being under Neil’s thumb helps.”

Chrissy murmured in agreement. Max caught her eye, seeing a seriousness cloud them. She knew what was coming next, a question she had been slowly bracing for but desperately wished to avoid.

“And what about you? You doing okay being in that house by yourself?” Chrissy asked, almost tentative.

She hesitated. There was no cut and dry answer to her question. Yes, she was physically fine. Neil had reserved his worst parts for Billy,

only swatting at her once or twice since he had left. But there were other ways to terrorize her. Destructive words when her mom was out of earshot, desecration of her things under the guise of fatherly punishment.

“As okay as I can be,” Max finally said. And that was the truth.

There were a billion questions Max had burning inside her that she hadn’t been able to ask anyone else. Having someone older she could trust to ask instead of the other girls her age, all bumbling around with the same minimal knowledge someone had regurgitated to them. She had wanted Chrissy, worldly and frank. Instead, she picked at the grass, laying the blades in a zigzag on her thigh.

“I’m thinking about going back to California,” she confessed. The words didn’t sound right aloud. They had sat on her chest for the past year, not long after her guidance counselor had handed her pamphlets for out-of-state schools. “I’ve been looking at UCLA. It’s closest to my dad.”

“Really?” Chrissy gave her a wide-eyed look, before nodding. “That’s big, Max. Huge.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea?” Max asked, voice trepid.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, is it a good idea to be so far away from Billy?”

One of the things Max had always liked about Chrissy was her refusal to hide her feelings. They painted themselves on her face, in her body language. Right now, everything about her was confused, concerned at the words she had uttered.

“Max,” Chrissy said, disbelief coating her voice, “you can’t plan your life around him.”

“I just don’t want him to be alone,” she said quickly, brushing off the grass from her knee as she leaned forward. “No one else knows what happened to him, Chrissy. I’m all he has.”

“So you’re just gonna babysit him forever? Do you know how shit he

would feel if he knew you were holding yourself back from what *you* want to do because of him?"

As Chrissy spoke, Max flinched at her words. The older girl obviously saw, giving a short, resigned sigh.

"I thought maybe... maybe he'd come back with me. He misses California, too."

"You have to ask him what he wants."

"I *know* that." Max couldn't help the irritability in her voice. "Honestly, I think as long as he got to see you, he wouldn't care where he was."

A blush spread across Chrissy's face. She looked away, gaze following the groups of people walking past. Vaguely familiar faces from around town, but none that seemed to pay any mind to the older girl despite her loud clothing. Max had thought maybe a few of the people Chrissy's age would've spoke up, said hello.

"Are you going to move back?" she asked softly.

Chrissy hesitated for a beat, guilt casting over her features. Max felt a stab of regret herself. It wasn't her intention to make Chrissy feel bad. She knew the answer, at least for now, but couldn't help but wish this surprise appearance was the beginning of a new chapter with Chrissy back home.

"No," she said. "I'm not. But the plan is to visit whenever I can. I get free flights and my schedule isn't as nuts as it was when I first started."

Though Max had steeled herself against no as an answer, disappointment still flooded over her for a few moments. She wondered if Billy had felt the same, knowing Chrissy's presence was short-lived. If he thought of begging her to stay like Max had done three years ago.

"Am I gonna see you again before you leave?"

Her eyebrows raised as she contemplated it.

"I mean, tomorrow night I'm free."

"Like, we can hang out without Billy around?" Max asked, hopeful.

"That was the idea. No Billy's allowed." Chrissy blew a few strands of hair from her face. "You wouldn't happen to have any weed, would you?"

"No," Max said woefully. "Neil goes through my stuff to much to keep it at the house."

"Bummer," she muttered. Chrissy gave a shrug, patting Max on the arm. "No biggie. I'll grab some booze and we can drink at the lake like a couple of bums."

Max felt her mouth pull into a bright smile. "So that's a no on that beer today?"

Chrissy only let out a laugh.

14. spinning empty bottles

It was certainly strange being back.

The same red flowers in neatly trimmed shrubs sat outside the white covered porch, same creaky bench swing sat unoccupied in the side yard. At some point, new concrete had been poured for the steps out front. An intrinsic urge to climb through Billy's bedroom window came over Chrissy, despite knowing there was no one inside to greet her with an exasperated look.

The thing that threw her about the Hargrove house was how inconspicuous it was. How utterly normal and plain it looked from the outside. The moment Chrissy stepped inside, she always felt a tension. Anxiety seeped into the floorboards, fear into the curtains. How anyone could survive in such a place was a mystery to her.

And yet, Billy and Max both managed it. It was sick, how managing, *surviving*, was all they could do, but Chrissy was grateful there was an exit from the terror inside.

Her body ran cold as the doorbell chimed under her finger. Residual fear had surfaced, her being screaming to run before pain could hit again, before sad eyes begging her to stay cut her open so deep it would take ages to form scar tissue over the wound.

Susan answered the door.

"Chrissy!" Her voice was so pleasant, beautifully warm. Before Chrissy could say anything back, arms wrapped around the brunette. Jasmine and lemon filled her senses, the faint scent of sandalwood lingering not far behind. It seemed to lift the spirit of the entire house.

"Hi Susan," she answered back, unable to hide a smile.

"Oh, sweetie, come on in," Susan said, ushering her inside. "When Max said you were back I about fainted. You've been missed."

"I missed you too." She had, in all honesty. There was something bright and airy about Susan that never failed to make her feel welcome. "If Max isn't ready yet, I can go hang out in her room—"

A hand waved the notion away. "She'll be done in a second. Tell me what you've been up to."

Chrissy wasn't sure how much Susan had heard from the letters to Max and Billy. Tentatively, she spoke of flights, of her latest trip to Austria that had yielded a newfound love of Vienna. All the while, Susan sat, rapt with attention. Chrissy couldn't help but wonder if she had been on so much as a honeymoon, much less a trans-Atlantic flight.

It seemed as soon as she had relaxed into the floral couch, Neil had sniffed out her comfort. It was like an extra sense, knowing when his presence was least wanted. Despite her best effort, Chrissy stiffened, her posture stick straight as he walked towards her. He was too close for comfort, his cheap cologne overpowering any of the pleasant scents lingering around his wife.

"Christina, what a pleasant surprise."

"Mr. Hargrove," she said, the words cutting like glass in her mouth. "Good to see you."

"I hear you and Maxine are having a little girl's night," Neil smiled.

Chrissy only nodded. The less words out of her mouth, the less likely she'd say the wrong thing and potentially get Max in deep shit.

"Well, I hope the two of you have some fun. Make sure she gets home by curfew," he said. Chrissy nodded again, shifting uncomfortably. "It'd be a shame to see her turn into a rule-breaker like you used to be."

"Chrissy!"

Oh, thank god. Chrissy let a sigh of relief filter quietly through her nose. "Max, hey!"

"Shit, how long have you been waiting?" Max asked, face bright. "I

didn't hear the doorbell. Headphones."

"Maxine, language," Neil warned, the uncomfortable, friendly look still on his face.

Chrissy couldn't understand why he kept up this appearance around her. Of course she knew what he had done. What he still did to Max. The terrible things he had called her behind her back, the offhand comments that insinuated she had gone into her line of work to whore herself out.

"It's fine," Chrissy said, a bit too quickly. "I wanna get to the lake before it gets too dark. You got your swimsuit?"

"Already on," Max replied. She turned to her mom, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "I'll be home by eleven."

"Jesus *Christ*, he's the worst to talk to," Chrissy said as she slammed the door to the Oldsmobile.

"Imagine living with that for half your life," Max huffed, pulling out her pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her vest. "Your parents aren't gonna pitch a fit if I smoke in here, right?"

"They can deal." Chrissy shook out a cigarette from her own pack, letting it dangle from her lips as she started the engine. "Just roll the window down."

A steady stream of smoke trailed out the windows as they drove off, a local station blasting loud enough to potentially blow the speakers out. Max sang along, yelling the chorus to a Bonnie Tyler song with a pleasant rasp to her voice.

"You should be in choir, girl," she commented, flicking the butt of her finished cigarette out the window.

"Not my scene," Max replied, the loose curls of her hair bouncing as she bobbed her head.

"Oh yeah?" Hazel eyes flicked towards the freckled face next to her before focusing back on the road. "And what exactly is your scene?"

“Monster hunting,” she decided after a moment, a sudden devilish look spreading over her face.

“I thought you were retired from that,” Chrissy grinned.

Max shrugged, tuning to a different station as a commercial came on. “I can come out of retirement if I need to. But I don’t know if I really have a scene. That’s okay, right?”

The insecurity in her voice sank deep into Chrissy’s stomach. She knew the feeling all too well. She had been on the fringe for most of her life, skirting different cliques with no true place to call a social home.

“Yeah,” she said, pulling into the parking area for Lover’s Lake. “Drifters are cooler, anyway.”

With the sunlight waning, Chrissy had come prepared with a few dry pieces of wood and kindling. She had done the same thing before with her group of friends, digging a little pit for a small campfire to provide light and warmth after the temperature dipped and the cold of the water clung to skin. As she set up her little fire, Max started to strip from her street clothes.

The sight of Max in a swimsuit, much less a bikini, was a terrifying smack in the face of how much time had passed. She suddenly felt old, despite the mental eye roll she could see her mother giving her at the mere thought of 21 being considered ‘old’.

“You look so pretty,” Chrissy gushed. “Like, your hips are *perfect*. Mine are all dip-y and weird.”

“They are not,” Max retorted, pulling her hair back with a scrunchie. “You look like Cindi Crawford. I look like a string bean.”

“A cute string bean.” She began to toss kindling into the pit, arranging the logs the best she could. Flicking her lighter on, she let

the fire slowly build. “Like Twiggy.”

“Good to know I’d fit right in the 60’s.” Max bent down, watching her intently. “How do you know this stuff? It doesn’t seem like it’s in your bag of tricks.”

“Girl Scouts,” Chrissy said, glancing over to the redhead. “After my parents split, my mom signed me up so I could ‘productively use all my pent-up energy’ or something. I did troop camping trips for, like, four years.”

“I’ve never gone camping,” Max said. “I mean, I did once with my mom and one of her boyfriends before Neil, but he cut his finger open really bad trying to open a can with a knife so we had to leave the same night.”

“I’ll take you,” she offered. Sand pressed around her fingers as she leaned back onto her hands, watching the fire grow. “There’s this island in upper Michigan my dad used to take me to. It’s super pretty up there.”

Max dusted the sand off her palms, a grin spreading across her face. “You promise? I wanna go before I graduate.”

“Promise, but only if you split the drive with me.”

That only served to make Max beam harder.

“I’m gonna get in the lake,” she announced, standing up.

Chrissy hopped to her feet, dusting off her bottom. It’d been a long, long time since she went swimming at night. Life had gotten in the way, strict bedtimes to make early flights a detriment to enjoying the warmth of a pool or the bay.

Muted footsteps and giggles rang out as they ran to the edge of the lake, giving only a moment of hesitation before charging in. Chrissy let out a shriek, flopping into deeper water in hopes to acclimate her body to the cool waters. As she surfaced, Max was already treading farther out, quiet splashing echoing in the emptiness of the forested area. It took only a moment to join her.

Daylight was holding on by a thread, purple light bathing over the entirety of Lover's Lake. In the waning light, she could see Max, tendrils of copper floating at the surface like watercolor across toothed paper. Contentment painted across her freckled face, eyes closed as she floated with the soft waves. She wished she could give the girl this peace forever, away from her troubles and insecurities. That they could just float forever, warm and safe from anything that wished them the slightest harm.

Chrissy let herself float, the humid air now a touch cooler with the water that clung to her skin.

"The moon's out."

Chrissy glanced Max's direction. Her arm was outstretched, pointing upwards towards the cluster of pink lit clouds.

"There, you see it?" she asked, blue eyes almost purple in the dusky light. "It's like... what's it called, waxing crescent? It was a new moon just a few days ago."

"I don't know anything about the moon," Chrissy said, gazing at the sliver of white in the sky. "It's pretty though."

"I used to want to be an astronomer when I was little."

"Like, tell people's fortunes?" she asked, confused.

"No," Max answered, "that's astrology. Astronomy is studying space."

"I thought you wanted to be a pro-skater?"

Max let out a tiny laugh. "I can't believe you remembered that."

"I remember lots of stuff," Chrissy said, running a hand up her forehead to slick away her hair. "It might not be school stuff, but it's still important."

"I'm glad you did."

They treaded water, laughing and splashing each other until they tired of their game. Settling next to the fire on a few blankets,

huddled in beach towels, they sat chatting away about nothing. The shows they were watching, new music that had caught their interest.

Chrissy had produced a six-pack of cheap beer and a smaller flask of whiskey, the two handing them off taking swigs between chatting. It was comforting to know that there was no need for liquid courage to fall back into pleasant conversation. It certainly made them louder, more prone to falling into a fit of giggles.

"What were you doing earlier?" Max finally asked, finishing off her beer.

"Hanging out with Annette and Steve," she replied, lighting another cigarette. Spots of water pooled on her thighs as it dripped from chestnut strands. "Did you know they were dating now? Because I sure as hell didn't."

Max shrugged, pulling her hair over her shoulder. She began to plait it, knee bouncing as she looked out at the lake.

"Steve really hasn't been around much, so I figured he found a girlfriend or something," she replied, reaching for another beer. "Better than hanging out with a bunch of high schoolers."

"It's just weird. He's basically like Cam's dad now."

Max snorted. "Took him long enough to graduate from babysitting to being a dad, I guess."

Chrissy couldn't help but burst into a fit of giggles. If Steve ever heard the ginger say such a thing, he'd definitely get all huffy about it.

"How was it? Besides the weirdness with them being together."

The answer to that question wasn't a cut and dry one. While she had enjoyed seeing her friends, the discussions that had come from her admittance that she had slept with Billy again were less than enjoyable.

"Are you sure that you want to do this, Chrissy?" Annette had asked.

"I just don't want to see you get hurt again," Steve had said, giving her those concerned puppy eyes.

She let out a sigh, tendrils of white floating up to join the fire's wisps of smoke.

"It was okay. They weren't the most... receptive of me and Billy getting back together." With a tap, she let the ashes fall to the sand before looking at Max. "I kind of feel like I shouldn't have said anything."

There was an unusually hard look on Max's face, the grip on her beer stronger than necessary.

"Screw what they think," she finally said with a huff. "They don't know him like you and I do."

"That's true," Chrissy mused, taking a swig of her beer. "I mean, he's been hanging with Annette, so it's not like she doesn't know how *different* he is from when we were in high school. Y'know?"

Quiet settled around them, the song of crickets and gentle lapping of water against the short filling the lull.

"He never told me, you know," Max said, breaking the silence. "Why you broke up with him."

Oh boy, she thought, a grimace spreading across her features. Almost instinctively, she grabbed the flask. This was gonna need stronger stuff than what she was currently drinking.

"I wouldn't want to either, if I was him." Her eyes avoided the other girl as she took a swig.

"It was another girl, right?"

Chrissy managed to find the courage to look Max in the face. There was no judgement in those deep blue eyes, no anger. Just a need to understand.

"Yeah," she mumbled. "He got too cozy with Heather. And way too cozy with some chick at a concert."

Max's lips curled into a frown. "He's such a moron sometimes."

"You said it."

"I didn't know back then," she continued, blue eyes watching Chrissy. Trying to decipher her body language, the way she held herself so still with the hope she could disappear from this conversation. "Honest. I just thought he said something stupid, like he always did, and it was the last straw. And then you left, and it finally clicked that it had to be something really, *really* bad that you wouldn't want to stick around after everything."

"That isn't the reason, Max," she sighed, rubbing at her eyes. "Not even the whole thing with what happened at the house. I wanted to leave even before all that happened. Breaking up with him just make me realize there was more out in the world for me than what I was about to settle for."

The redhead was quiet. She took another cigarette out, the warm glow of the flame highlighting every freckle on her tan face.

"He was a mess," Max offered. "Like, right after you broke up. It was kind of pathetic, honestly. I've never seen him so mopey and angry over a girl."

A small smile bloomed on her lips. "Is it bad that makes me feel better?"

"Nah." A plume of smoke obscured Max's face and the smile that sat upon it. "It'd make *me* feel better."

The crackle of wood under the flames filled the pause after her words. It was cathartic, in a way, to finally speak of the break up between her and Billy to someone besides Annette. Someone whose first instinct wasn't to paint a villain, but to find understanding. She sighed, toes curling as she stretched out.

"Are you and El still good friends?" she inquired, eyes lazily following the flames before them. "I know you said her and Mike are still attached at the hip."

"Yeah, we are," Max answered, gripping the blanket tighter around

her thin shoulders. "She's the only person who really *gets* it, you know? She saw everything. Felt everything. It's weird, like she knows Billy better than I do sometimes. Sometimes she still picks up on his feelings, I guess."

"I thought she didn't have her powers anymore."

"It took a long while for them to come back," Max said. Her chin rest atop her knees. "It's kind of annoying now, actually. She can't drink or smoke with me because it makes them go kind of haywire."

"Bummer." Chrissy scratched away at her chipping manicure. "She doesn't mind you do that stuff, though?"

"Not really. I mean, if she does, she doesn't say anything. I think she gets that I'm not gonna be the same person I was in middle school. El even changed once she started high school."

"Whoa, wait," Chrissy said, leaning forward. "She's going to school now? Like, public school?"

Max nodded, taking another drag of her cigarette. "Since sophomore year. It was rough, she still was speaking kind of funny so she got picked on a lot. I don't think I've beat up so many people in my *life*."

"Max."

"What?" she retorted, voice creeping higher. "Look who I have as a big brother. You think I'm going to just stand there and ask nicely for them to stop?"

She leaned back, hands clasped in front of her chest, giving her best puppy eyes. "Please, mister football player, don't beat up my weird best friend! She's oh-so-lovely once you get to know her! *Fuck* that."

Chrissy couldn't hold back her laughter. The thought of Max getting into a fight with anyone, much less a football player, was hard to fathom. But she was right. If Billy could teach her anything, it was how to fight and *win*.

"Hey," she said, spreading out onto her blanket. "Let's play Truth or Dare."

"Truth or Dare? Just the two of us? Isn't that kinda lame?"

"Kinda, but I still wanna do it." Chrissy rolled over, taking a drag from her cigarette. "I can go first. Dare."

Max laughed.

"Fine," she said, "I dare you to scream as loud as you can. Like, make it echo."

Chrissy lifted an eyebrow. "Easy."

She stood, doing a gentle jog to the edge of the lake. Max trailed not far behind, coming to a stop to her right. Chrissy gave a glance to her, the cherry of her cigarette the only thing lighting up her face against the darkness. Air rushed into her lungs, puffing out her chest as slim hands cupped around her mouth.

The scream resounded over the lake, dulling only as it hit the trees along the edges. It almost felt cathartic, everything she had holed up inside her for years bellowing out in a single noise.

"Oh my god," Max chortled. "You sound like you belong in a horror movie."

"Okay, your turn."

"Truth."

"Hmm," Chrissy tutted. "Okay, are you still a virgin?"

The creeping glow of embarrassment filled Max's cheeks, visible even in the dim light.

"No," she replied. "Not anymore."

"Who was it with?" Chrissy asked, settling back down on her blanket. "Was it Lucas?"

"Hey, follow up questions aren't fair," she protested.

"I'm gonna ask them next time you say truth anyway. Might as well

spill now."

Max grumbled as Chrissy took another drag.

"Yeah, it was Lucas."

"Aww. I'm glad. He's a good kid," Chrissy said, giving a soft smile. "That's what you need for your first. Someone good. Someone *nice*."

"It wasn't like I expected," she said softly. "Not bad, but just... not what I thought."

"Yeah, mine either. You can read all the Cosmo's you want and they'll never actually prepare you for what happens." Chrissy looked over her face. "Did it get better? I mean, it takes practice for it to be any good. For either of you."

Max nodded.

"Are you supposed to bleed?"

"The first time? Most girls do. Everyone I know did."

"Okay," she said, a sigh of relief blowing from out of her cheeks.

Chrissy watched her, a pang of protectiveness hitting her straight in the chest with terrifying precision. This was the kind of stuff you talked to girlfriends about, the stuff your mom said you could ask about but you both knew was untouchable. She wondered how often Max had wanted to ask her these things. If she had just kept the questions squirrelled away.

"Chris?"

"Hm?"

"Truth or dare?"

She let out a sputter of a laugh, pushing back a few loose waves from her face.

"Shit," Chrissy said, tapping a beat on her cheek with her nails.

“What the hell. Truth.”

“How many people have you slept with?”

Chrissy paused, letting out a low whistle. “I dunno, a lot. More than most.”

“A girl in my grade said she’s been with, like, three guys already.”

“Well, I’ve got her beat by a long shot,” she said, wincing a little. “I was at nine that I could remember by the time I met Billy.”

“That’s...” Max trailed off, tapping the side of her beer. Chrissy recognized the pale lilac color of her fingernails as a shade she had given Max before moving away. “That’s a lot.”

“Yeah, I know. Wasn’t called the town slut for nothing.”

“That’s not fair,” she said with a frown. “I mean, that’s so *mean*. I’m sure there’s a ton of guys who have done it with way more girls.”

“Like Billy?” Chrissy said with a cheeky grin.

“Exactly,” Max agreed, mirroring her grin.

“Your turn. Truth or dare.”

The redhead mulled it over for a bit before shooting a smile. “Dare.”

It was quiet for a bit. Chrissy let her palms rest on her eyes, leg bouncing against her other knee.

“You die or something?” Max’s voice rang out.

“I’m *thinking*, shut up. I want it to be a good one.” She hemmed and hawed for a few seconds more before her eyes lit up. “Oh, this one’s good. This one is *good*. ”

“Lay it on me.”

“I dare you to go in the lake, come out,” she took a dramatic pause, “and roll yourself in the sand. Like, completely coat yourself.”

"Nevermind," Max said quickly. "Truth."

"No take backs," Chrissy retorted, standing. "Go on."

Max let out a long, dramatic groan as Chrissy helped her to her feet. She watched as the girl took a deep breath before she ran into the water. In the low light, she could see her break the surface, squealing as the colder air hit. As soon as she was in, Max was out of the water, plodding towards Chrissy.

Chrissy gave an expectant look, hands settling on her hips. Another groan and Max flopped to the ground, rolling back and forth on the sand. Laughter rang out, echoing in the open space as Chrissy doubled over, her balance taking a hit from the alcohol in her system.

"It's in my mouth!" Max yelled, sputtering. "Jesus, it's actually *everywhere*."

Sand flew as Max shook off her hands, attempting to dust off her palms enough to wipe down her face. Chrissy could no longer see her expression, tears clouding her vision as she continued to lose it.

"You look so dumb," Chrissy gasped, cackling. "Oh my god, I wish I had a camera. You seriously look ridiculous."

Instead of a retort, Chrissy found Max slamming against her, sand grating against her skin as she shrieked. She went down easy, her laughter mixing with Max's as she rubbed her hands in Chrissy's hair.

Chrissy couldn't remember the last time she had laughed that hard. Her ribs hurt, chest so full of light she felt as if it would light up the night sky if it burst through her. Max was now settled next to her, shaking sand from her long, ginger locks.

"You look disgusting," she said, grinning at Chrissy.

"Right back at you." Chrissy grabbed her towel, wiping away the sand caked on her cheeks. She grabbed at her watch, eyebrows raising. "Oh, *shit*, it's almost your curfew. Neil is gonna go ballistic."

Max quietly rubbed off the sand from her legs. The silence was telling of how true Chrissy's comment was.

“We can stay a while longer,” she said softly. “I’m not good to drive yet, anyway.”

“Please.” The word was pleading, almost desperate. “Neil gets pissed if I’m a minute late or an hour, it doesn’t matter. Spending more time with you is gonna make it worth it.”

Despite the balmy warmth of the air and heat from the small fire, Chrissy’s body was ice. Sinking into fear for the girl in front of her, unable to figure out how to help. She wondered how many nights Max spent on that little air mattress in Billy’s flat. How often she begged not to be taken back home, the repercussions of her absences. The mix of guilt and relief Billy must have felt every day knowing his sister was still navigating life with his father.

If this was what Chrissy could do for her, she would do it with gusto. Take her away from that hell a while longer, give her a sense of normalcy.

“I’d rather spend more time with you, too,” Chrissy said, giving a warm smile. “Let’s wash this shit off us in the lake, huh?”

“I’m gonna be finding sand in my ass crack for weeks,” Max muttered.

“You and me both, sister.”

15. dream about the future

“Someone’s in a good mood.”

Billy glanced up, wiping sweat off his face with a rag. Drew, one of his coworkers, was standing next to him cleaning off a set of wrenches. Drew was in his late twenties, deep brown skin and deeper eyes, the hint of a beer belly starting to appear under his coveralls. Sometimes a little too friendly for his taste, but tolerable. He had made Billy's start at Fallon's Auto significantly easier, and for that Billy was eternally grateful.

“Yeah?” he answered, casual. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, for one, you’ve only called Preston a shithead once today,” Drew answered with a grin. “You win the lottery or somethin’?”

“In a sense,” Billy said back. “You remember that girl I told you about? The one I dated who moved to Florida?”

“The flight attendant with the nice rack?”

Billy glared at him enough for the other man to slightly shrink back. He suddenly regretted spending as much time as he did in a bar with this dope, spilling god knows what in a drunken haze. He hoped for Chrissy’s sake — *and his* — that details had been kept to a minimum.

“Yeah,” he said, lips pursing into a thin line. “That’s the one.”

“She call you again or something?”

“Even better. Showed up this weekend while I was at the pool.”

“No shit!” Drew exclaimed, face splitting into an excited smile. “Look at you, lover boy.”

“Call me that again and that socket wrench is going up your—”

“So, what, is she waiting for you to get off work?”

He sighed, readjusting the messy ponytail he had gathered his hair in. "Yeah. She leaves tomorrow so I was going to drop her off at the airport."

"Already?" Drew said, raising an eyebrow. "Don't seem like a lot of time."

"It is what it is."

"Hey Preston! We should be good without Bill the rest of the day, right?"

A head popped out from under a Honda Civic. "Yeah, why?"

Billy groaned as Drew leaned against him, smacking his chest with an open hand.

"Lover boy here's got a hot date with his flight attendant, figured he could use some extra time to get pretty for her."

Preston let out a wolf whistle, grinning as he pulled his handkerchief down from his mouth. Billy's face immediately went slack, staring off at the rack of tools on the wall. This was the last time he would talk about his fucking personal life around these assholes. They seemed to *live* for the chance to tease the youngest member of the crew, no matter how much he threatened to kick their asses. Perhaps he'd have to make good on a solid punch to one of them.

"Damn, Bill. Wish Drew would let me cut early so I could get laid by some pretty thing."

"Preston, shut the *fuck* up."

"So touchy," Drew laughed, walking away to grab a few things from the workbench. "Finish up cleaning and you're free, man. Bring her by some time, we're all curious to see if she's as fine as you say."

"In that case," Billy drawled, slinging the rag over his shoulder, "she's never setting *foot* here. Can't trust you punks with nothing."

Two days felt like an eternity.

Sadness crept around the edges of her excitement. Spending another night with Billy felt like a dream, but one she would have to wake from tomorrow when she returned home to Tallahassee.

Talking with Annette and Steve hadn't helped much, their own trepidation about the future of her and Billy's relationship waivering her resolve. She felt so damn *confused*, so irritated that she couldn't just be happy with what she had regained without questioning everything.

Chrissy wanted to be with Billy. That was all she was certain of. Wanted to soak him up, meld with him.

She wished she could tuck him away in her pocket, bring him back to the tropical climate she called home now. Let him see the ocean, even though it wasn't *his* ocean. Let him thrive in perpetual sunlight, far away from the bad memories and lingering doubts.

Truly, Chrissy wished she could do the same for Max. Maybe in her spare time, she could look into emancipation procedures. The thought of it made her head hurt, but protecting the girl she had come to see as a sister would be worth it.

A rumbling groan shot into her hands as she covered her face. As her departure crept closer, it became abundantly clear how unprepared she was to leave. The first time had been easier, in a way. There was one less person conscious to say goodbye to. She had a purpose in leaving Hawkins, something to smother the guilt. Now, she had nothing but an obligation; guilt slowly seeped into her bones, weighing her to the bed.

The rumble of the Camaro down Elm Street pulled her out of her thoughts. Put a smile on her face she couldn't seem to contain. Billy was early, hours earlier than he had promised. One last gloss over of her room, then the bathroom — *good thing too, as her little sun necklace sat on the counter* — and Chrissy thundered down the stairs, luggage in hand.

Her excitement waned with the gathering of her family in the living room. The three of them all looked at her, sadness clouding their faces. Her mom, who had barely been holding it together most of the morning, was now a bleary-eyed mess, still attempting to hold back tears. Wes just looked profoundly lost, unable to fathom the girl he had raised as his own striking out on her own again.

She felt the worst about Caitlin. Sweet, funny Caitlin, who had grown into a whip-smart person the years she had been gone. Who had navigated their homelife without the older sister she had come to rely on her entire life.

"Come back sooner next time," Caitlin instructed, her face sad.

"I will," Chrissy said softly. "Promise."

Her mother was now crying. A fist seemed to clench around Chrissy's heart, the memory of being seen off at the airport by her mom and Wes years ago pushing forward as if it had happened only days ago.

"Ma, please," she croaked, slipping her arms around her. "Don't cry, okay? I'll be back soon."

"Oh, sweetheart," Patty said, voice wavering as she hugged back. "When did you become so grown up? My baby, flying all over the country. Travelling the world."

"Just like I said I would," Chrissy added. A little chuckle punctuated her words as she let her head rest on her mother's shoulder.

"Just like you said you would," Patty smiled, blinking back tears. "I'm so proud of you."

Knuckles rapped at the front door, the signal for Chrissy's departure.

"Door's open!" she called out, gripping her mom harder in her embrace.

The door swung open. Billy, mussed up from a day of work, stepped inside, careful to stay in the foyer to prevent tracking in any dirt. Chrissy's eyes locked on his, a smile creasing them into slivers.

"You ready to go?" he asked, voice gentle.

"Yeah," she said. "I think so."

Another round of hugs went to her family, the air in her lungs squeezed out by the fierceness of them all. Billy looked on, careful not to disturb the familial love with his presence. Once released, Chrissy grabbed her things, making her way out of the DiMartino house until the next time she made an appearance.

Billy helped her load her things into the trunk of the Camaro, waiting patiently for her to slip into her place in the passenger seat. Situated and buckled in, Chrissy finally gave him a once over.

He was covered in grease and oil, hair in a disheveled ponytail. Sweat from exertion and the humidity of the summer gleamed off the curves of his skin, highlighting every muscle he had worked hard to regain after his time in the hospital.

"You look so gross," she said, leaning in to wipe a bit of grease off his cheek.

He grabbed her with his grubby hands, taking care to wipe oil over her cheeks as he planted a kiss on her lips. Chrissy let out a squeal, laughter filling the body of the Camaro.

"So do you," Billy shrugged with a devilish grin.

"It looks hot on you at least."

An eyebrow twitched upward, Billy's eyes skimming over her entirety. He seemed pleased by her confession, tongue wetting his lips as they curled into a smirk.

"You think this is hot, huh?"

Chrissy's cheeks flushed. "In a blue collar, 'porn character whose going to barter sex for car maintenance' kind of way."

Billy's eyes glinted at the comparison.

"Oh, babe," he hummed, "you *know* I'm way better than porn."

Chrissy was *impressed*. She thought it would be hard to top the dramatic change in Billy's living situation, but the fact that he could cook now almost made her head explode. A far cry from the boy who had overcooked eggs that one morning in May. She couldn't help but feel proud of him, even if it was such a necessary and banal thing. Everything felt like a victory after Starcourt, and Chrissy would gladly celebrate it all.

Billy had deflected any praise, red tinging his cheeks as he set out plates at his little dining table. Lied, saying it was just things he had in his fridge even though it was a damn feast. Pork chops with seared apples and oven roasted green beans. She had done her best to follow instructions to help, but ended up standing to the side, watching with rapt attention as he worked. Enjoyed every last bite, teasing him that he'd have to cook for her every time she showed up now.

As they lay strewn across the couch after their meal, time seemed to slow to a comfortable pace. The stereo played softly in the back, Billy complaining there was nothing good on at the moment. Chrissy liked it, just being able to lounge with him in silence.

That was until the word she had dreaded finally fell from his lips.

"Stay," Billy said suddenly.

"I can't, Billy. You know that."

"Transfer," he tried again. "You can live with me. I'll take care of you, Chrissy."

The corners of her mouth tilted into a frown. It was a beautiful notion, to want to take care of someone like her. But the reality was she couldn't hinge her life on a beautiful thought.

"I'm not moving back here, Billy. I got out, I can't come back to a

place that has nothing for me."

"I'm here," he said in a small voice. "Am I nothing?"

It nearly broke her heart, hearing the hurt in his voice. Seeing him look wounded, almost as if she had kicked him.

"You know what I meant," she sighed.

"It doesn't have to be forever. I don't wanna stay here, either. We can move someplace."

"Like where? California?"

He perked up. "Yeah, like Cali."

"Or Chicago?" she added.

It had always been her secret love, Chicago. Their date so many years ago had been a litmus test of sorts to see his reaction. If, perhaps, he could grow to love it like she had. Now, with their reunion, she felt more eager to transfer there, no longer held back by her fear of being alone.

"Wherever," he said dutifully. "I just want it to be with you."

Chrissy gave him a tired look, a sad smile on her lips. "Give me time to think about it. Okay? We have time now."

The crestfallen expression on his face was something she would never get used to. It hurt him, the fact that she couldn't — *no, wouldn't* — drop everything to focus on picking up where they left off. "You gonna miss me when you go back?"

"Are you?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

"Not if you're up here regularly."

Chrissy gave a snort. "What does 'regularly' mean?"

"Once a month, at least," he grinned, pulling closer by her hips. "Think you can swing that, pretty girl?"

“No, but I can try my best.”

“Good enough.” He gave a little shrug, bringing her hand to his lips to kiss the palm.

Hazel eyes took in the gentle expression of love as quiet settled around them. Fingers stroked the hair around her face. Billy was slowly learning where he could touch, how to prevent another panic attack by being vocal. Chrissy was in awe of the care he took. Maybe it was something he learned from his shrink.

“You’re serious about still wanting to go to California, right?” Billy asked as he shifted to sit up. Chrissy let her head rest in his lap, gazing up at his chiseled face.

“Deadly.” She gave a lazy smile. “I don’t know if I could swing the road trip, though.”

Billy shrugged leaning down to plant a kiss on waiting lips. “That can be a trip for another time.”

“I can fly you out, you know,” she added. “For free.”

“I hate planes,” he confessed as he made a face. “They give me the heebie jeebies.”

“But you’re okay with me flying all the time?”

“No.” An almost distressed noise rumbled from his chest. “Makes me nervous as hell, especially when you’re doing those Europe flights. Not like I’m gonna tell you to stop, Chris. It’s your job.”

“I wouldn’t listen to you anyway,” she declared with a triumphant grin.

“I know,” he mumbled, rolling his eyes before pushing a few frizzy curls from his face.

His respect for her autonomy was, quite frankly, astounding. How many other girls did she fly with leave their jobs once a boyfriend or newly wed husband had told them it made them uncomfortable?

Too many, Chrissy shuddered. Her sense of self was tied with the independence she had carved for herself. A few years ago, she would've considered dropping everything for Billy if he asked. It almost scared her, looking back, how willing she had been to shrink herself and her desires just to be loved.

Still, a question burned inside her. Billy's total refusal to entertain her fantasy of running away together that one summer afternoon had haunted her. It had been such a blow to her self-esteem, that night that she had cried long after everyone had fallen asleep in the DiMartino home.

"Why'd you hate the thought of staying there so much?" she asked softly. "In California, I mean."

Those ocean eyes seemed to thunder a bit, unease poking through the paper mask of calm he tried to keep on.

"When you wanted to go to California, never come back," he said, "it freaked me out. I thought you'd wanna get married or something. Was afraid we would end up like my folks. I didn't want you to be miserable because of me, far away from anyone."

"You're not gonna end up like your dad, Billy." Her answer was adamant. "You're a *completely* different person than he is."

"You don't know that. It's in me, Chris. I do my best to ignore it but..." he trailed off. "Don't you get scared you'll turn out like your folks?"

"Of course I do," she said slowly. "That's why I can't come back. I don't want to be like my mom, who doesn't have a life outside of our family. Her whole life is just full of '*somedays*' that aren't gonna happen."

"I wouldn't let that happen," Billy said softly as he placed his palms behind his head. "We have '*somedays*' too, Chris, but we're gonna make them happen."

It was so pure, so boyish. A part of Billy that he had hidden from her again and again after he had given her a taste.

"Do you," Chrissy started, before pausing. She buried her head in his chest before hazel eyes connected with his ocean ones. "Do you still feel afraid of the future? I mean, with me in it?"

"No," came the quick answer. "Not like I used to be. Sometimes it still freaks me out. But you're what I want, so I'll deal with it."

"What if I want to get married?" she tried. "Have kids?"

"How soon are we talking?" Billy asked slowly, hesitance clouding those blue, blue eyes.

"Not for a long while," Chrissy admitted. "I'm not ready by a long shot."

He shrugged. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about it sometimes."

"I've had dreams about it," she said, almost embarrassed.

"Me too," Billy said, giving a half-smile. "Though, most of mine you're marrying some other asshole and I'm screaming my head off telling you not to do it."

Chrissy's lips formed a pout, eyebrows creasing. "That's... cute, in a weird way. I like that you dream about me."

That seemed to embarrass him, a tinge of pink rising to his cheeks as he shrugged. "You're my girl. 'Course I'm gonna dream about you."

You're my girl.

She felt she could almost float. A subtle admission of love; it had taken her this long to understand the ways he had always said he loved her without spelling it out. And she had learned to adore each way, spoken or pressed to her skin as if the strength of his feelings were just a given.

"Jury's still out on kids, huh?" Chrissy asked, giving a half smile.

The way his lips pressed into a line, she knew the answer hadn't changed a bit. The fact that he even was debating wanting them in the first place in some far-off future was still a shock. She knew what

he had gone through, but couldn't imagine the terror of repeating the mistakes of those before him. He just looked so tired even thinking about the possibility.

"Yeah," Billy said, kissing her forehead. "Jury's still out."

Chrissy resolved to leave the topic alone for a long while. Testing the waters, that's all this was. It wasn't a desire that was at the forefront of her mind, nor was it something she felt particularly *ready* for. All she really cared for was the knowledge that she was someone he could see that kind of future with.

"Me too," she murmured, pressing her cheek to his shoulder. "Just like the idea of it, is all."

Another kiss pressed onto her forehead. "I kind of like it, too."

16. such sweet sorrow

Billy awoke before Chrissy.

Perhaps it was the anticipation of the day, the realization of the countdown. He liked to think his body has absorbed his excitement at waking up next to her.

Fingers slipped between her thighs, pressing into her folds. A murmur escaped her lips, face screwing into confusion, then need. Her hips rocked softly into his hand, then back against his growing erection.

So pretty. Like she always was. Something about Chrissy in the moments before wakefulness found her made his heart race. There was an innocence about her, the worries of her mind far off and leaving her completely lax.

Billy couldn't help a moan as she rocked into him again, grinding with intent. Slowly, he slipped between her legs, burying his face in her shoulder as she gasped at the intrusion of his cock between her thighs. Hands wandered to her breasts, rosy nipples at full alert against his fingertips.

"Morning, sunshine," he muttered into her skin. The exhale he blew through his nose made her squirm, cold air against flushed skin.

"Not morning," she managed to say. "Still dark out."

"Wishful thinking, babe." Billy slowly slid closer, letting her growing wetness coat him. "You want me to let you sleep?"

"No," Chrissy answered, sleep still laced in her words. "Kind of hard to go back to sleep with your dick between my legs."

Billy chuckled. She always had a comeback, even when half-asleep.

"Condom," she mumbled, grasping lazily at his arm.

Frustration rumbled in his chest. "Why?"

"Because I have to *work*, you dillhole." Her hands flitted up to her face, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"You sure you don't want something to remember me by?" he grinned, licking his lips.

"You're disgusting," she retorted, elbowing him slightly in the ribs. He let out a quiet *oof*, groaning into her shoulder before parting from the warmth of her body.

Surprise came in the form of her hand on him, giving long strokes to his length as he fumbled through his nightstand. He paused for a second, watching her work at his cock before baby blue eyes flitted to meet hers.

A languid smile swept across her face, head tilting to the side as she watched his reaction. She seemed to soak up every ragged breath, every twitch of his face as her hand continued its practiced motion up and down. Every so often, the Chrissy he remembered emerged, and this was one of those crowning moments. The teasing smile, the need for his attention to be all on her no matter if she had given him a task otherwise. Always reminding him who had control over the situation.

"You want me to fuck you or not?" Billy huffed, any bravado falling away with the overwhelming lust inside him.

"What if I say no?" came her answer, dripping in feigned innocence.

"Then you're a liar," he said simply.

Foil crinkled as he removed her hand, slipping on the condom. With a swift motion, he rolled on top of Chrissy, pinning her arms down gently as lips connected with the skin of her collar bone. She let out a lusty giggle, bottom lip pressed between her teeth.

"I'm going to ask again," Billy said, voice gruff. "You want me to fuck you or not, pretty girl?"

Chrissy managed to wiggle an arm out of his grip. Her hand trailed its way down his stomach, taking its place on his shaft once more.

“How much do you want me?” she whispered.

Billy could only manage a groan, sandy waves falling onto her chest as he bucked into her hand. “You can feel how bad I need you, Chris.”

“Tell me though,” she said, pouting.

Something about the tone of her voice made something deep in Billy snap. He took her hand away, instead guiding himself into her silky wet folds with a moan. Chrissy let out a whimper, fingernails digging into the flesh of his bicep as he sank deeper into her.

As their bodies rocked together, a melancholy seemed to seep out of his pores. The realization that this was the last morning he would wake with her beside him for god knows how long crept up. Billy decided he would make it worth remembering until the day she returned.

All her little gasps and the way she hummed out his name would be a song he'd have stuck in his head for weeks. Billy was no artist, but he painted the image of her lidded eyes, the way her lashes laced together as she came, every last thing about her expression in his memory to keep forever.

With a pathetic groan, Chrissy finally rolled out of bed. Not one bit of her wanted out of the warmth of Billy's bed, his embrace. The promise of repeating this experience was all that gave her resolve to get up.

He had woken her up almost an hour before the alarm was set to go off. *Never again*, she huffed, grabbing a towel from the linen closet in his bathroom. No matter how much coffee she drank before her next few flights, exhaustion was going to crush her like a bug beneath a shoe.

She stood there, staring blankly at the knobs in the shower. *Fuck*. It

was the worst part of staying someplace new, figuring out how a shower worked.

“Billy?” Chrissy called out. “Can you, uh, help me with the shower?”

It took a few moments for him to stumble in, rubbing sleep from his eyes. The calm ocean of his eyes flickered, before a slow grin spread across his face.

“Only if I get to hop in with you,” Billy teased, draping his arm against her shoulder.

“It’s your shower, I’m not gonna stop you.”

His face went slack at the disinterest in her voice. The arm left her, nudging her aside as he twisted the brass knobs and flipped up a little switch.

“After you,” he said, gesturing towards the partially open curtain. “Brat.”

Chrissy couldn’t help but stick her tongue out at the blonde before stepping in. The pleasant heat of the water rained over her, relaxing her shoulders before fingers ran through her waves. The curtain rustled open and shut again, the warmth of Billy’s body pressing against her back. It didn’t take long for his hands to find a home on her breasts, chin resting on her shoulder.

Chrissy let out a shuddering sigh, pleasure shooting through her being once more. She let out a frustrated groan, taking his hands away as she shuffled to face him. Flecks of water had left his body glistening, hair taking on a darker shade of blonde as it became saturated. He already was hard again, beautifully flushed and begging to have her hands wrapped around his girth again.

“We don’t have time,” she said woefully.

“You don’t have time for me to touch you?” he murmured, eyebrows raising as a sickly sweet smile played on his lips. “That’s a damn shame, I was gonna get your back for you.”

A small pout formed on her lips. “I’m serious.”

“So I am. Time crunch, I get it. Grab the soap.”

As soon as the bottle of body wash changed hands, his fingers found their place against her breasts, lather forming over the crests. Chrissy let out a whine, almost instinctively grasping at his cock. Billy let out a low noise, pausing for a second before continuing the gentle working of the soap against her skin. Up her shoulders, then down the curve of her waist, all while she gently worked at his length.

“You’re impossible, you know that?” he griped. “Three years and you still haven’t learned how to make up your damn mind.”

“I’m working on it,” Chrissy said, her voice slightly defensive.

His fingers gripped the flesh of her hips, hard enough to make her wince a little. Chrissy watched as his face journeyed through his internal struggle, finally settling on a slight sadness. His hand enveloped her own, pulling her off his erection.

“I know I’m going to regret this but,” Billy said, “I’m not making you late for work, chica.”

“Billy—”

He ignored her protest, squirting more body wash onto his hands. “Turn around.”

“Just let me—” she said, tears coming from out of nowhere. “Just let me make you feel good. Before I have to go.”

He gave her a small smile, making a small motion for her to turn. Chrissy did as she was told, feeling not unlike a small child being ordered around. Calloused hands worked their way across her back, thumbs dragging down her spine only to leave a tingling sensation where they had been.

“You can make it up to me in the car if you want,” he said softly in her ear. Chrissy stiffened, a flush rising to her cheeks.

It had been a struggle, finding space for both of them in the

bathroom while they got ready. Billy had given up after a few minutes, content with brushed teeth and a swipe of deodorant as Chrissy worked at drying her hair. She felt a little bad, but appearances were *everything* with her job. Compromising her time in front of a mirror would result in demerits. They would just have to figure out a system for next time.

Next time. The very thought of coming back filled her with excitement again. She wasn't even out of the state yet, and already the prospect of seeing Billy, being able to hold him after time away, made her soul explode like fireworks.

She finally shuffled out of the bathroom to find Billy's room empty. On a closer listen, she heard a racket downstairs; the radio, Chevy meowing as Billy talked to her. It brought a smile back, just hearing the noise of a daily routine.

As she made her way to the kitchen, Billy glanced up only to do a double take.

"Holy shit," he uttered, eyes widening as he set down his glass.

After wearing it day in and day out, Chrissy's feelings about her uniform were impartial. It was just that: a uniform. Some girls wore the trousers offered, but she gravitated towards the knee-length pencil skirt. Billy's reaction wasn't anything new to her, but the fact that it was his made her stand a little straighter.

"You like?" she asked, giving a twirl before joining him in the kitchen.

"Jesus, Chris," Billy said, a hand running over his lower face.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"*Jesus,*" he repeated. "I wasn't into uniforms before but I think you may have changed that with this getup."

"See, now you're just being gross," Chrissy retorted, swatting him away as his fingers played with the silk scarf around her neck.

"You sure I can't just take a test drive with this?" Billy's head cocked

to the side, eyeing her up in such a way that Chrissy couldn't help but flush a deep pink. "Y'know, for science."

"Science, shmience." She leaned in, giving him a long kiss. "We have to leave soon. I'll be late for my flight."

"Tell 'em you had a pressing matter to take care of."

She giggled. "And what is that?"

"Me pressing you into my mattress," he grinned.

The hum of the engine and quiet power chords coming from the speakers filled the drive to the airport. It wasn't due to a lack of wanting to talk; Billy didn't know what to say to Chrissy. From the look of it, she had no clue either.

It killed him. Drove him insane, letting the time slip away in such a tense manner. As the rural setting gave way to a much more urban one, houses no longer cushioned between fields and acres of lawn, he felt his body unsettle. A finger tapped on the leather of the steering wheel, no care given to match itself to the beat of the song playing.

"I don't like it," Billy finally said.

"Don't like what?" Chrissy glanced at him, every bit of her just as tense as he felt.

"Knowing I'm going to wake up alone tomorrow." He swallowed hard, finding it harder each time to tear his gaze away from that freckled, heart-shaped face.

Out of the corner of his eye, Billy saw her lean her head back against the seat as she sniffled. He'd seen her do it far more than he'd like to admit, a way to stop the tears from ruining her makeup.

"I hate this," Chrissy croaked. "I'm not ready to leave."

Then don't.

The words bit at his lips. His plea the night before hadn't done the job, and begging her now would just spoil the time they had left. But, god, did he wish she would change her mind.

Don't leave me here alone, Chris. I need you.

Instead, he grabbed her hand. Manicured fingernails pressed into his skin, grip hard enough to leave little half-moons in his flesh once he looked. His thumb rubbed against her silky skin, an attempt to soothe her. To soothe himself, although he'd never admit it.

"Maybe it won't be so hard next time," he said quietly. Wishful thinking.

"Yeah," she murmured. "Maybe."

Billy had never thought about what went into getting a flight off the ground. Watching Chrissy hustle off to the flight attendant lounge to check in and grab whatever mail she had waiting, he wondered what else went on behind the scenes. How much work she truly had to do besides serving peanuts and tiny bottles of booze.

No wonder she's exhausted all the time, he thought as he lit up a cigarette.

An array of people filtered past him as he waited on a bench, business people and families all walking with purpose to their gates. A face or two looked familiar enough to stare, but not enough to make any move to alert them.

He was just at the end of his first cigarette and debating lighting another when Chrissy made her way over, heels clacking on the beige tile. She bent down, giving him enough time to ogle the cleavage in front of him before planting a kiss on his lips. He'd really have to work on convincing her to wear that uniform out of work.

"You hungry?" she asked, almost breathless.

“Starving,” Billy answered, putting out his cigarette in the ashtray.

“Me too,” Chrissy replied. “I need to get coffee or I’m gonna keel over mid-flight. We’re still waiting on the rest of the crew, so I have time.”

The options for food were abysmal at the Indianapolis airport. So much so, Billy felt guilty for not grabbing food along the way or making time to cook breakfast. There wasn’t a single complaint out of Chrissy, unusual for her but admirable. Who knew how many mornings she had to settle for terrible food at worse airports.

They finally settled at a little diner-esque stall, large coffees and an array of breakfast foods splayed in front of them. Talking about everything and nothing. What her next flight after today was, how grown up Max seemed now, laughing at names of cities. Chrissy finally managing to, between fits of giggles, tell the story of how she almost got attacked by an alligator.

But like all things, their mundane bliss was fated to end. A quick check of her watch, and Chrissy’s face fell. Billy didn’t need to be told what it meant. Silently, all the plastic containers and napkins were swept up and thrown away, the radio from the stall’s kitchen playing too jaunty of a song for how he was feeling.

Chrissy’s hand slipped into his, soft and warm. Filled the caverns between his fingers like they had always meant to do so.

“How many flights do you have today?” he asked. Anything to break the terrible silence between them.

“Three,” Chrissy answered, voice already tired. “Cheyenne, Spokane, then Dallas. Then I get to go home.”

“That’s a lot.”

Chrissy shrugged, giving him a half smile. “I sometimes have to do six stops in a day. I’m lucky I’m heading home tonight at all.”

“Poor baby,” he murmured, kissing the top of her head as he drew her close.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her gate. A sense of dread

housed itself in the pit of his stomach, threatening bile and the food he had managed to get down just minutes before. Every cell screamed to prevent her departure, to bid one last time for her to stay.

A coldness swept up his spine as she dropped his hand from hers. Looking down, Billy saw she was on the verge of tears again.

Hands cupped her face, careful to not disturb the light makeup swept across her features. Billy took a slow taste of her lips, then another as she pressed into him. Chrissy pulled him into a tight embrace, attempting to prevent the distance between them from growing for just a moment longer. He hugged back, burying his face into the top of her hair.

He had never felt so desperate to commit someone to memory before. The bright florals that defined her scent, the way her chest rose and fell as she breathed, the way her hair tickled at his chin. Billy could tell she was doing the same thing, breathing him in deep to take as a souvenir until their next meeting.

“I’ll call once I’m home,” she said, the words wavering before finding their footing in her voice. “I promise. I’ll get my own line and we can talk whenever—”

Her words were cut off as he pressed his lips to her. His forehead pressed against hers, eyebrows knitted together as he screwed his eyes shut.

“I’ll call you every night if you want me to,” he said, hoarse as emotion overtook him.

A voice over the PA startled Chrissy. She pulled away slightly, a breath shuddering out of her before she turned back.

“I love you,” Chrissy said, sniffing as she bit at her bottom lip.

“I love you, too,” Billy managed to croak out.

“I promise, I’ll be back soon.”

“You better.”

One last kiss bloomed between them, one last embrace. A murmured 'I love you', and she was gone, face switched on to a performative happiness.

And then, Billy was alone. Strangers rushed around him to get onto their flights, mothers scolding children while teens chattered excitedly about their upcoming adventures. People who all had someone with them, or something wonderful at the end of their destination. The thing he wanted, his person, had just slipped from his grasp again, flitting off to her world in the sky before she reclaimed her place next to the ocean.

A deep emptiness swallowed him, attempting to drown him in its nothingness as he returned to his car. Breathing seemed like a chore, his mind focused on willing his heart to keep beating despite the gaping hole it had been dealt.

He made it as far as the city limit before the tears stinging at his eyes began to fall. The Camaro hummed as he pulled over, putting it in park before draping his arms on the steering wheel and rested his head. The tears were silent at first, shuddering and tucked between the power chords of a Twisted Sister song blaring. It took Billy by surprise how fast they grew in volume, how terrible and hurt they sounded. How absolutely pathetic he felt, a grown man sobbing on the side of the highway. In a small corner of his mind, he heard his father's voice, berating him for this show of weakness.

But he would let it out, ignore that voice. Do what his shrink always asked of him, to not hold back when the emotions got too overwhelming. She would be proud of him, Billy thought grimly, wiping his eyes with his palms as he reached for his cigarettes. The rush of nicotine in his lungs served to calm him a bit more, sniffing as he put the car back in gear.

As Billy walked into his flat — *narrowly avoiding a conversation with Midge that he knew he was ill-equipped to handle right now* — the void Chrissy had left became apparent.

She was no longer some far-off vision. Chrissy was everywhere and

painfully present. Billy couldn't even bear to walk into his room, the mussed up blankets a brutal reminder of the body that had lay next to him, curled around his being. It hurt so viscerally that even his scars ached for her to soothe them.

Billy had always heard of solar eclipses, of how the moon and the sun would meet for a few brief moments in the sky to create an unearthly phenomenon. That was how he felt these last few days had been. Ephemeral, so blinding and beautiful but fleeting. She was light, and all he could hope was for her shine to hit him and reflect outwards.

Chevy settled on his chest as he lay on the couch, unable to bring himself to get up to do anything. Billy would've contented himself with the damn thing swallowing him whole. The cat's purrs seemed to help soothe his heartbeat, body settling as fingers swept across the ball of fluff staring at him with half-closed eyes.

"Just you and me, Chev," Billy said quietly. All he got in return was a paw to the chin.

He wasn't sure how long he laid there, just stewing in the renewed quiet of his home. Long enough for Chevy to tire of her spot on top of him, slinking off to a different part of the flat. He sucked in a breath, rubbing at the bridge of his nose before finally hefting himself up.

A scrap of paper stuck to the fridge with one of the magnets he had swiped from work. Gingerly he took it, eyebrows raising at the contents. Chrissy had copied her flight schedule, written neatly in her bubbly handwriting. Circled several times with a few tiny hearts surrounding it was her next trip to Indiana, slated for June.

See you soon!

17. satisfaction

Two hundred dollars.

Two hundred *fucking* dollars and all he had to show for it was growing sexual frustration and a sense of longing that consumed him. It was the biggest phone bill he had ever seen in his life, and he could only assume Chrissy's was just as daunting.

It was worth it to hear her voice when she wasn't travelling. To have a piece of her almost constantly present.

A hand ran through his curls, air hissing through his nose as he set down the bill. If this was to be the norm, he'd have to futz with his budget to accommodate it. Talking less wasn't even an *option* in his mind.

His one solace for this hit to his wallet was the fact that Chrissy would be back in Indiana next weekend. A short stay, but it would be enough to tide him over until the next time.

In between her return and the next, Billy would make good use of their calls, getting his money's worth out of the sometimes dollar-a-minute calls.

Dissonant voices, all melding together without creating any true conversation he could pinpoint filled the echoing halls of the airport. The hiss of an airplane filled the spaces between, a woman's voice over the PA warning for the last boarding of a flight several gates down. Billy took a drag of his cigarette. It was almost like those tapes Max had as a kid of whale song and the ocean, ambient and calming. Noise to cancel out his spinning thoughts of what his second meeting with Chrissy would be like. How she would react. If she would cry

again.

God, he hoped she wouldn't. He was tired of seeing her cry on his account, even if they were happy tears.

Amid his thoughts, the passengers of her flight started to filter off the jet bridge. All sorts of folks, tired and glad to be back on solid ground. It was a slow procession, too slow for his comfort. All Billy wanted was a glimpse of her, reassurance that she was really here. Unconsciously, his leg started to bounce, ash from his cigarette falling to beige tile.

Then, he spotted her.

It wasn't quite a shiver, more of electricity under his skin. It lit up his jaw, down his arms and hit right in the heart. The feeling of home returning, of a piece of him joining once more in slow motion. Billy put out his cigarette, pushing his way through the other flyers to meet her.

She was a model of feminine professionalism in a double-breasted navy jacket and skirt. Bright eyed and laughing with her coworkers as they stepped off the jet bridge to the terminal. She seemed so at home, so in her element that Billy couldn't help but be proud of her.

Chrissy finally caught his gaze, those honeyed olive eyes lighting up even brighter than before. It was the point in the stupid chick flicks that Susan and Max forced him to watch where the orchestra would swell. He could almost hear it in his head.

Christ, he thought with a grimace. *What kind of sappy shit is that?*

Chrissy nearly knocked him over from the force of her running hug, a dull thump echoing as her luggage hit the floor. He staggered back, curling his arms around her. She was *here*. He could finally touch her, finally kiss and adore her. There was something out in the vastness of the universe that had looked down upon him today.

"I missed you," she chirped, fingers lacing behind his neck as she pulled away from his kiss. "Like crazy."

"Missed you too," Billy smiled, running a hand down the small of her

back. "Have I mentioned you look sexy as hell in that uniform?"

Chrissy rolled her eyes, pushing at his chest. "Only every chance you get. Give me five, I have some stuff in the lounge to take care of."

"Then you're gonna let me rip that thing off you?"

Another smack to his chest. Billy couldn't help but cackle at the pout on her face.

"You're such a horndog, you know that?" she retorted, pulling his hands off her.

"One of my best qualities," Billy smirked. "I'll be waiting."

To her credit, she wasn't gone very long. It felt like ages, but every moment apart now felt like it lingered far longer than necessary. Billy had meandered around the area near the lounge, taken a piss in the cleanest public bathroom he had seen. Just as he was taking a long drink from the drinking fountain, swallowing down his afternoon meds, Chrissy reappeared, suitcases in hand.

"All set?"

"Mhm." She knocked her shoulder against his arm, unable to keep her giant smile off her face. "Where'd you park?"

"The roof," he said casually. The look in his eyes betrayed his tone, Chrissy only grinning wider.

"To the roof, then."

The roof was, thankfully, still empty for the most part. Only a few cars had taken the trouble of making their way up there, as Billy had hoped. They had barely reached the Camaro before Chrissy had pounced, Billy only barely able to open the driver's side. A flurry of mouths crashing against each other, hands roaming for places they felt most at home in. Before he knew it, Chrissy had crawled atop his lap, straddling him with an eagerness that made his cock twitch.

Billy's eyebrows raised, watching as her navy pencil skirt lifted to reveal garters clipped to lace lined stockings.

"You wear those all the time?" he asked, playing with the lace of her stockings.

"Nope," Chrissy said, grinning. "Just came prepared."

"You know me too well," Billy murmured. A hand slipped between her thighs, rubbing at the fabric of her underwear. Chrissy let out a small whimper, pushing down against his fingers.

Billy took his hands away from her, undoing his belt and slipping his jeans down his thighs. As she adjusted on top of him, he slid her underwear to the side, letting his thumb run gently against the slippery heat between her legs.

"What are you—?" she breathed, hooded eyes looking down at his erection then to him.

He couldn't help but give a smirk. "Making good on that promise to fuck you with your panties on."

As he pushed her down onto his length, he wet his lips, watching every little expression on her face. Thought about how often he had wanted this, her lilting voice dripping with adulation for him. How she could dress herself up so proper and modest, but underneath the pressed blouse and wool skirt lurked the same slutty girl who sucked him off in the school auditorium.

The memory made him buck up into her harder. There was not a care in the world for how easy it would be for anyone to come to the top of the parking structure and spot them. Just the driving need to derive pleasure from her and give it right back.

Gasps, noises. Billy was drowning in them; the glazed over look in her eyes only served to sink him deeper into the wave swelling, threatening to crush him on the shore at any moment. Chrissy seemed to swallow him whole any time she was present, and he had no qualms about it anymore.

Shit. He felt that wave nearing its collision course, far sooner than he

would've liked. *Should've rubbed one out before I left.*

It didn't help that she was taking him faster and faster, the signs of her own climax starting to rear their heads. Billy snaked his hand between her legs again, taking in a sharp breath at the sight of the strain of the garters against her stockings. Letting his fingertips rest on her lower stomach, he let his thumb brush against her clit with her own motion.

Familiar pulses around his cock followed by her halting cry brought a smirk to his face, tongue peeking between rows of white teeth. He'd coax a few more rounds out of her before the night was through. This was just an appetizer, as far as they were both concerned.

His orgasm hits like a truck against a wall. A low moan bit at the back of his throat, released into the space between their lips. As blood rushed back to his head, he realized the lack of condom, the mess to follow. It, for once, didn't seem to matter to her, the excitement of their bodies touching negating anything else.

Stillness settled for a few moments in the air around them. Like a breath held finally released from aching lungs. Billy hated that it was over, but the promise of more, of that same satisfaction of fresh air in his lungs, willed him through the seconds after. Her hands found their way between the now disheveled mess of curls around his face, brushing through them with care. Caressing him so tenderly her softness could transform him to glass.

"You staying long enough to come home?" he asked. Billy paused, realizing what he just said. *Home*. As if his flat was now hers.

Manicured fingers trailed down to the bare part of his chest peeking through the undone part of his wine-colored shirt.

"I leave tomorrow, sorry," she said softly, a guilty look on her face. "I have a hotel room, though."

His eyebrow quirked. "Hotel room, you say?"

"Mhm," she purred, biting at her lip. "Perks of the job."

Billy was ambivalent when it came to hotels. He had never stayed in one that could be considered nice, and now that he was standing in one, he wasn't sure it was a place he belonged. He leaned against the reception desk, taking in the surroundings as Chrissy finished up checking in.

"Chrissy! Hey!"

Billy turned to the direction of the voice. Three women, all in the same uniform as Chrissy, were making a beeline towards them. He glanced down at the brunette, watching as her face lit up.

"Hey!" she chirped. "I figured you guys would be checked in already."

"We are," the blonde one said. "It's too early to turn in, you know? We were going to head out and see what the bars here had to offer."

Billy stood silently as they all chattered. It had been a while since he had seen Chrissy in a group of her peers. They were a far cry from her little clique back in high school, girls she had slowly drifted from as their friend circles melded. Bitchy little gossips who ogled him and spread inconsequential rumors about his and Chrissy's strange relationship. These girls seemed friendlier, more confident in themselves. The fact they had no idea who he was definitely was an added plus.

"Is this him?" the brunette with highlights asked.

"Am I who?" Billy asked, a bemused look on his face.

"Oh," Chrissy said, taking in a sharp breath. "Yeah, this is Billy. Uh, Billy, this is Mel, Sloane, and Katie."

The blonde, Mel, let out a squeal, causing highlight brunette, Katie, and the fake tanned one, Sloane, to start cackling. Billy shot a perplexed, yet amused look at Chrissy, who was slowly turning pink.

"I can't believe we get to meet you!" Mel exclaimed. "Oh my gosh,

we've heard a ton about you."

"For serial, Chrissy never shuts up about you," Sloane added, shooting a sly smile Chrissy's way.

"I'm gonna hope it's mostly good," Billy said.

The girls threw glances at each other before bursting into another fit of laughter.

"Oh, honey, *trust me*, it's all been five-star reviews," Katie said between giggles. "Let me put it this way, she was reviewing a restaurant, and we've heard the service is *incredible*."

All the while, Chrissy had turned a bright pink, shooting daggers at the three. It was cute, seeing her all embarrassed. Even cuter that she had gushed to her coworkers about him, knowing here, sparing no detail about their sex life. It was a gigantic lift to his ego, not that he particularly needed one.

He slung his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close despite a small whine. If she was going to blab to every person she knew about them, he might as well play with it.

"Aw, sunshine, didn't realize I was famous now," he teased.

"Shut up."

"Should I start handing out eight-by-ten's?" Billy continued, a glint in his eye. It'd been so long since he *really* had the chance to push her buttons. "Sign 'em 'Chrissy's love slave'?"

Chrissy's fellow flight attendants burst out laughing, Sloane's shooting through his ears like high pitched lightning. It was a wonder Chrissy could stand her. Though she seemed to have a higher tolerance for annoying people.

Billy let out an audible grunt as Chrissy's elbow connected with his ribs. A quick glance at her face and he realized that last bit may have gone a bit too far. Chrissy had gone from pink to red, a hard look on her face. A look that told him once they were out of earshot, he'd be getting reamed out.

Though, came the slow and sly thought, it also might mean a rougher fuck later. Billy, despite his best effort, grinned as he licked his upper lip. *Worth it.*

A throat cleared behind him, the hotel worker obviously over their antics. “Anything else we can help you with?”

Chrissy turned her head, her voice finding its sweet tone again. “No, thank you.”

“You girls have fun,” Billy said, pulling Chrissy close once again despite her obvious annoyance. “I’ve got a hotel bed to test out.”

Billy let out another ‘oof!’ as Chrissy’s elbow connected with his side again before she strode off to the elevator. The three women let out a round of barely contained giggles as the brunette strode past. With a wink and a salute, he sauntered past to catch up.

Totally worth it.

When all was said and done, Chrissy was still annoyed at him hours after his stunt in the lobby. She had almost forgotten what a dick he could be, teasing until it wasn’t funny anymore.

Had she been in a foul mood, she would’ve closed up shop and slept in the other queen bed. Hell, even locked him out to fend for himself until she cooled down. But time was limited, and Chrissy knew if she spent it sulking or punishing Billy in some way, it’d just end in regret.

Instead, her frustration amalgamated with lust. Undressed in front of him, slow and teasing but far enough away to keep him from touching. She flit around the hotel room, nude besides her little sun necklace, going about her post-workday routine. It was hard to ignore him, the agitated noises coming from the bed he had settled in at least a reward for her conviction.

Asshole deserved to wait.

After she had refreshed herself, taking her sweet time in the bathroom, she crawled onto the bed, pulling the covers over her.

“G’night.”

“You’re *kidding* me,” Billy said, letting out a groan. “Fucking tease. You’re the devil.”

Chrissy couldn’t keep up the act for very long. Her shoulders started to shake as she held back laughter, covering her face to prevent him from catching on. Billy sat up straight, putting a delicate hand on her side as he bent over her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see his face screwed up into worry, those ocean eyes starting to storm over.

“Hey,” he said, tone radically different from before. Soft, comforting. “Chris, I’m sorry about earlier. Don’t... Don’t fucking cry, okay?”

She couldn’t hold it in anymore. Cackling filled the air, gasps of air punctuating them as she laughed harder at his expression went from concerned to annoyed within a second. One of the extra pillows on the bed hit her square on the face, only causing her laughter to grow louder.

“Your face,” she managed to gasp out. “Oh my god.”

“Get bent.”

She flipped over, arms wrapping around Billy’s torso before he shoved her off. Chrissy fell back onto the mattress, face screwing into a pout.

“Billy, come *on* —”

“Seriously, get bent, Chris.” Billy’s tone mirrored his face, steely and jagged. “That’s not fucking funny.”

“What, so you get to humiliate me in front of my coworkers, but this is too much?” she stormed, sitting up. “I didn’t even do anything, *Christ* .”

He said nothing, instead standing and buttoning his jeans.

“Billy,” Chrissy tried again, trying to keep the anger from her voice.

He ignored her, pulling his shirt over his head and grabbing his smokes and a key for the room.

“Billy, please, just get back in bed,” she pleaded, pushing the covers away from herself. He shot her a glance, one with such ire that she felt as if her skin had been pulled back exposing her even more.

“No,” Billy answered, his jaw setting as those wild eyes drilled through her. “You get cozy, I’ll be back up when I fucking feel like it.”

The way the door slammed rattled the stopper, that wobbling metallic noise echoing in the room until the carpet seemed to absorb the last vibrations. Chrissy sat cross-legged on the bed, dumbfounded by his reaction.

She couldn’t figure what she had done to make him react that way. He hadn’t seemed mad about the teasing. It was only until she crawled into bed next to him that his demeanor had flipped.

Hands swept through curls loosened by a day of wear, a frustrated noise filling the empty air. She sat for a few minutes more, contemplating if it was worth it to follow or to just let him blow off steam. In the end, Chrissy rolled off the bed and rummaged through her things to find something to put on to chase after him.

Silk slid down her curves, a slip the only thing she could part with right now. Pulling on her heels, she strode down to the lobby, past questioning looks from other occupants at the state of her dress and hard look on her face.

The air was like a thin layer of mist that clung to her. She spotted Billy, sitting on the pavement next to a row of bushes, looking to be on his second cigarette already.

“I’m sorry,” Chrissy said, tucking her legs against her tightly.

Billy just seemed in his own space, barely even noting she spoke.

“Can you tell me what I did?” she asked quietly.

His sigh was less annoyed and more tired. Like the thought of talking about what had happened exhausted him. The thought crossed Chrissy's mind again that perhaps her intrusion on his time alone would impede his return to calm. That he *needed* time to think.

Billy brushed back a few ringlets from his face, tapping off the ash from his cigarette. He did not look at her, instead focusing into the dark past the artificially lit porte-cochere.

"When I saw you, I promised myself I wasn't gonna be the one making you cry anymore," Billy said slowly, voice low. "And seeing you upset upstairs, I end up thinking, '*Man, I couldn't even make it a month.*' And I feel like complete dogshit because I can't even do the bare minimum of keeping you happy."

She wanted to shrivel up and disappear. To cease existing as this person who had ruined what had been a joyful reunion and sent Billy to such depreciating thoughts about himself.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, even softer than before. The words felt like they were grasping for space in the quiet.

Chrissy felt herself tense for a second as he glanced over. The tension filtered away at the realization the storm in his eyes had dissipated to clouded skies. Billy's hand reached out, offering the half-smoked cigarette to her. She took it, taking a drag before handing it back.

"It's just bullshit."

"What is?"

"That you still pull that shit. That I got mad at something so stupid." He took a sharp breath in. "All of it."

"I didn't know, okay?" The words sounded so defensive, totally unlike what she wanted.

"It isn't high school anymore, Chris," Billy said, the edge of anger returning to his voice. "I can't walk around on eggshells because I might say the wrong thing or not pick up on something you want from me. Not again."

"I'm trying to not be like that anymore," she protested. "Just because you see a shrink and have someone to... to coach you on how to not be a shitty person anymore doesn't mean the rest of us do. I'm figuring it out on my own. Cut me some slack."

It was quiet for a moment. "You really think I used to be a shitty person?"

Fuck.

"Not always," Chrissy admitted. "But you were really just... *mean* about things sometimes. Not just to me. Everyone. You'd say things that made me feel like what I wanted with you was stupid. And then... *that* happened."

He took in a sharp breath. Again those blue eyes stared straight into the darkness. Ashamed, regret etched onto every pore of his face. He took one last drag, flicking the butt onto the asphalt.

"Yeah," Billy finally muttered. "Fair."

It seemed no matter how much they both desired to leave that part of their past behind, it would always find a way to crawl out in the most vulnerable moments. Chrissy detested it. She'd spent so much time wrestling with the hurt and the self-loathing, even after she had forgiven him in his few moments of clarity that July afternoon. There was nothing more she wanted than to put it fully to rest. Perhaps she had shot herself in the foot, moving so far away it was impossible to get a full sense of closure.

But she had done her best. Refused to let it consume her. Decided early on to not dangle that betrayal over Billy's head and use it to hurt either of them any more than it already had.

"I miss the air conditioning," she said suddenly, leaning her head against his arm.

"You don't have to stay down here," he answered, eyes glancing down.

"Neither do you." Fingers brushed against his tanned skin. "Will you come back upstairs with me? Please?"

Billy seemed to mull it over, tongue clicking against his teeth. The long mussed curls flipped to back, and he grunted as he stood from the pavement. He offered his hands to Chrissy, which she gladly took. With little effort he hefted her up, pulling her into a hug. It felt desperate, charged with so many emotions that she felt smothered in them all. So she did what she could. Embraced him back, eased that intensity in his blood.

"You look like Vince Neil when your hair's like this," Chrissy said as she pulled away. Fingers wrapped around a few strands of hair.

"Now you're just trying to butter me up." A small smile couldn't help but wrestle its way onto his face.

"Maybe," she drawled with a cheeky grin. "Is it working?"

A true smile spread across his face as he looked upwards, shaking his head in disbelief at her. Chrissy went up on her tiptoes, pulling his face towards hers to place a kiss on his mouth.

"What's with this getup, by the way?" Billy asked, eyebrow quirking upward. "You trying to give Madonna a run for her money with the 'underwear as outerwear' thing?"

She shrugged. "Didn't feel like putting a bra on and I didn't want to waste clean clothes coming down here. So... my slip."

"I can see your nipples, you know."

"You've never complained about it before."

"Yeah, well," he said, blowing a stray piece of hair from his face, "I also wasn't at a nice hotel where my girlfriend's co-workers might see her prancing around in her underwear."

A flush rose to her cheeks. She'd forgotten in all the fuss the girls had gone out, running into them upon their reappearance something she had been chancing since the moment she left the room.

"Well, that nice hotel room is sitting there all lonely," Chrissy said, crossing her arms in front of her chest in an attempt to cover up pointed nipples. "Come back up and we can put it to good use."

18. black and blue all over

Had someone told him three years ago he would be sitting in a dining establishment that wasn't a fast food place or diner for a date, Billy would have laughed at them. It hadn't even been a money issue; dates at restaurants seemed so old fashioned and stuffy. Too romantic. Oppressive to his brash personality, having to behave himself.

Sometimes he marveled over the difference between his eighteen year old self and now. This was one of them. Billy had been the one to suggest it, and from the look on Chrissy's face, it surprised her just as much as it did him.

There was a part of him that wanted to *impress* her. To prove he wasn't the same dumb fuck who thought she was content with his half-assed attempts at romance. After all, Chrissy had orchestrated that trip to Chicago. She'd put so much effort into an outing for him, and only years after the fact did Billy realize how much of an ass he had been with his own date plans.

It wasn't anything particularly stunning. Enzo's was *the* date spot, slightly higher end for a large town trying to prove itself. But the dim light and live music made it feel like he had tried that much harder. Billy had made a conscious effort to look like an elevated version of himself that night, the pressed plum-colored shirt buttoned far higher than usual and hair sufficiently fluffy but tamed. Chrissy was stunning in a black mini dress with gold and roses embroidered down the center. It hugged every curve in such a way that suggested if he played his cards right, he'd get a healthy helping of them right there in the parking lot.

"The parentals go here for their anniversary," Chrissy piped up, taking in the surroundings after they had been seated. "Wes is so picky about restaurants, but he loves it here."

"Good to know it has Wes' glowing review," Billy deadpanned, giving a wry smile as he picked up the menu. "I think he still hates me."

“He does not. He’s never hated you.”

“I see him at Bradley’s and he gives me this look like he’d rather shovel shit than talk to me.”

“He does that to everyone when he’s grocery shopping,” Chrissy answered, unbothered as she read the wine list. “Trust me, he doesn’t hate you. I’m almost positive he likes you more than he likes *me*. ”

“You’re so full of it,” he said, eyeing up the waiter making his way over. “If he did like me more than you, it’s probably because I don’t hog the bathroom in the morning.”

Drinks and food had been ordered, conversation taking a turn towards a rousing debate on whether or not Nicolas Cage was any good in *Raising Arizona*. As their waiter placed their drinks in front of them, a whiskey sour for him and a glass of Chardonnay for her, Chrissy’s eyes lit up. She raised her glass towards him, prompting a grin from Billy as he clinked his glass against hers.

“To... hmm.” Chrissy blew out a sigh. “What do people toast to?”

“To how great your tits look in that dress?” Billy suggested, an impish grin pulling at the corners of his mouth.

Chrissy was in too good a mood to be the least bit offended or embarrassed by the suggestion.

“To how great my boobs look in this dress,” she declared, raising her glass.

The noise of the restaurant filled the moments while they took their first drinks. Quiet chatter and a rousing, yet romantic, piece played by the string quartet reminded him once again how out of his element he was. But he’d do it again, just to see her light up again like the sun was inside her.

“So,” she said slowly, finger skimming the ring of the wine glass. “California. When should we go? I need to put in a request for vacation.”

“September. Beach is perfect then, I’ll get to see if you actually

learned how to surf.”

“Do I get to meet your old friends?” Chrissy asked, leaning forward. “Or, like, your family?”

Billy hesitated. “Not sure if you’d want to.”

“I do, though,” she pressed, giving a warm smile.

“Not sure where everyone is anymore,” he said before taking a drink of his whiskey sour. “I think my Aunt Lori’s still in El Cajon. She’s the only normal one of the Hargrove bunch.”

“What about your mom’s side?”

Billy held back a wince. In truth, he had never been very close to his mother’s family, whether that was by his father’s design or something else entirely he didn’t know.

“They’re all in Sacramento, Chris. Maybe another time.” The line sounded eerily familiar until he realized his mother had said the same thing ages ago. “Besides... I kind of just want to keep you to myself a while longer. Before you get exposed to all that crazy.”

That seemed to perk her up.

“I like being just yours.” Her words were almost shy. She took a sip of her wine, picking at the white tablecloth. “But I already *am* exposed to it, just like you’re exposed to my family’s crazy. I just... want to feel like I’m a part of it the way you’re part of mine.”

His heart jackhammered in his chest. Perhaps he hadn’t realized in her absence how close he had gotten to her family. He’d given Patty his new number and address, talked to her on the phone more times than he cared to admit. Caitlin would tag along when Wes or Patty came by the shop for a tune up, eager to impart whatever exciting news unto his patient ears. The fact that even when he thought he didn’t deserve their care and — *dare he admit it* — love, they had seen him as someone worthy of it.

His first rush of emotion was fear. Being part of someone’s family by proxy was terrifying. But it soon gave way to a calm. If he had been

worthy in the eyes of a family who had seen him fuck up time and time again, maybe it would negate the crushing inferiority he felt when he saw Neil.

"I like their crazy," Billy said. "Suits me just fine."

Screaming.

Ugly, visceral screaming.

At first, her mind seemed to process it as a nightmare, until it seemed to puncture her. In a split second, everything in her woke up. Chrissy shot up, turning to see the source of the noise was Billy.

"Shit," she said, voice breaking. " *Shit*. Billy, wake up. Billy? Babe?"

He didn't answer, just kept yelling, frantic and so fucking *terrified* that Chrissy couldn't help but start to cry. An arm flailed outward, then his legs, pushing away the comforter and the air surrounding him. Chrissy could only scoot to the edge of the bed, avoiding the kicks and swipes at whatever his brain had created.

A feeling of helplessness she had not felt in years came over her. They hadn't talked about this. There was no protocol for what to do.

She rushed down the steps, nearly missing one in her panic. No sooner had she found the phone, Max's number had been punched in. It was a little after 1 am, hopefully still early enough for her to be awake.

"Hello?"

"Max, oh my god," Chrissy gushed, barely holding back hiccuping sobs.

"Chrissy? What's wrong? Why are you crying?" came the concerned voice on the other line.

“Billy,” she managed to choke out. “He... He started screaming in his sleep and I can’t get him to wake up. I-I-I don’t k-know what t-to do —”

“Fuck.” Max’s voice sounded strained. “Give me a minute. I’ll be right over. Just try to keep calm, okay? He used to do this a lot when he first came home from the hospital.”

“Is he gonna hurt himself?” Her voice felt like it barely could muster a whisper, knuckles white from the grip on his phone.

“Probably not. I’d take anything breakable away from the area just in case.” Max paused. “Chrissy? It’s gonna be okay. Promise. I’m gonna hang up now.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

Max’s presence was a balm on the wound. By the time she arrived, Billy had woken. She moved around so expertly, speaking softly and purposefully. Full of love and understanding. Billy let her on the bed, let her take him in her arms as they conversed too quietly for Chrissy to hear.

She felt like an outsider. All she could do was stand at the doorway, watching as Max did damage control as she had done for years. She was fucking useless, and it terrified her. It was no wonder Max had confided her fear of leaving, when she seemed to be the only one who could soothe whatever beast inside him.

“Chris?” Billy’s voice was hoarse, smaller than she had ever heard it before. So incredibly broken that it seemed to break her too.

She snapped to attention, timidly walking back into the bedroom. His eyes were bleary, tired and still hanging on to a shred of the panic he had felt earlier. An arm shakily reached out to her. Chrissy let her hand slip into his, feeling his strength as he pulled her close as Max shifted to make room.

A shaky breath in, hot, jagged breath out. It cycled against her chest, a mixture of sweat and tears against her shoulder. She hated every

second of it.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” he managed to say as his voice waivered, almost completely shot from the screaming. “I’m so sorry, Christina —”

“Don’t,” Chrissy cut him off, letting her fingers play with sandy curls. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I could’ve hurt you again.”

“You didn’t, though.” Lips ghosted against his cheek.

“I don’t normally remember those dreams,” Billy said somberly. “I just wake up screaming. But this one was just... I saw *him* again, Max.”

The color drained from Max’s face.

“Saw what?” Chrissy asked, concerned.

“That thing at the mall. The thing that got Billy.” Max leaned forward, rubbing a hand on his shoulder. “Do you want me to call El? Or Will? See if they felt anything?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No reason to wake ‘em up because I had a bad fucking dream.”

His shoulder twitched, rolling away from Max’s touch.

“Billy—”

“Seriously, Max. Drop it.”

Chrissy could only look on helplessly as they continued to argue, Max’s expression growing more impatient and Billy’s growing more annoyed.

“Is there...” she trailed off, suddenly feeling small under the weight of their eyes on her. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Pills,” Billy said, averting his gaze from her. “Grab my Valium for

me.”

She nodded so fast she felt her head would fly off. “And water?”

“Yeah,” came the answer with a small but appreciative smile. “Thanks.”

In the downstairs part of his flat, everything felt unreal. Too normal and untouched by what had happened, the energy Billy exuded too far away to seep into the living space. It almost felt safe, a moment of rest.

Tap water hit the glass as Chrissy stifled a sob. As she turned off the faucet, the glass clinked against the counter as another sob somehow made it past her defenses, muffled in her hand.

I'm so stupid. How foolish of her to think nothing like this was below the surface. That the pills and the shrink kept it all at bay or dissipated the horror he had faced. That Billy was healed in every sense and she could reap the benefits of a new man.

He *was* a new man. But not the one Chrissy had conjured in her head from the letters and phone calls. Whatever wounds he had were still sensitive. Not raw, but the scabs were ripped off by the unpredictable causes with ease.

The look he had given her after Max had settled him tore her open. Afraid, panicked by the cause and the aftermath of his night terrors.

Will you stay? his face seemed to say. *Will you still love me when I am so hard to love?*

After calming herself down and making her way up the stairs, she grabbed the little orange pill container marked *Valium*. Eyed it up, wondering what exactly its purpose was in all this. She'd have to ask him sooner than later.

Walking back into the bedroom, Chrissy handed off the pills and water to Billy. Watched with genuine curiosity as he took one, waiting for her invitation into the sanctum.

It came with that look again. Bleary eyes and parted lips, a question

behind them of if he was still worthy of the effort to be loved the way he was now.

Chrissy had decided. She'd love him, take care of him in any way she could. She wasn't a monster hunter like Max, someone who could drive off the demons that lay hidden. But she could learn. Fight when he became too tired and overwhelmed by them.

"I love you," Chrissy murmured, taking his hand in her own.

It was like she had given him the gift of life. Relief washed over his face, the token of words bringing that part of his anxious mind to a still.

"I love you too," Billy replied in that same hoarse tone as before.

Max stood, pulling her hair into a low ponytail. "I'm gonna call Mom and tell her I'm staying tonight."

"Okay," he answered, almost distracted by Chrissy's touch. "Tell her not to worry, yeah?"

Max nodded as she left.

Billy pulled Chrissy into bed. The coolness of his skin against hers was a comfort, as was the now measured breathing as his chest rose and fell against her. The only thing that betrayed his newly found calm was the rapid beat of his heart.

"Fuck me," he whispered to her.

"Billy..." her voice cracked, pulling back to give him a heartbroken look. "Don't."

"Chris, please," Billy tried again, almost desperate. "I just want to feel normal."

"It's not gonna help." Chrissy swallowed hard, cupping his face with her hands. "Can I just lay with you instead? Just... let me be with you."

Billy's eyes squeezed shut as he gripped her hips a little tighter. A

small nod came as he released her. Chrissy made her way across the bed, pulling him into a tight embrace against her. As he settled, seemed to drift off back to sleep, she hope it would be enough.

The morning after, there was coffee.

Billy was still asleep, curled up in his sheet with a foot hanging off the bed. He had rolled over at some point before consciousness found Chrissy, his warmth no longer enveloping her. She watched him for a few moments, marveled at how peaceful he seemed after such emotional turmoil hours before.

Stairs creaked as she made her way downstairs, again unburdened by the energy of last night. She could hear music coming softly from Max's room. Chevy had followed her downstairs in hopes of a meal, and now was rubbing against her legs as her patterned tail twitched.

Routine was a gift amid the spontaneity of her lifestyle. The pouring of coffee grounds into a filter, setting out two mugs — *three, once she remembered Max* — waiting as the gurgling of the machine plopped black liquid into the carafe. Quiet rustling of a bag of cat food, the clink of kibble against ceramic. And the sun rose, an ever constant thing she could rely on.

As gently as she could, Chrissy unlocked the back door, coffee and smokes in hand. She swept a few leaves off the banged-up lawn chair on Billy's back porch, settling into it to watch the sky slowly shift from it's pink and yellow gradient to a lovely blue. A sip of coffee, the flick of her lighter, the sizzle of the tobacco under the flame; all mingled with birdsong and the cicadas. A quiet she rarely found for herself anymore on the road. Despite everything, she was at peace for the moment.

The door clicked open. Chrissy gave a glance, seeing Max pad outside, barefoot and steaming mug of coffee in hand, to join her. For the first time, she looked tired. Worn down by what life had thrown

at her. A sleepy teenager with so much burden on her shoulders.

"You're up early," Chrissy said quietly, handing the pack of cigarettes over. Max took one, giving her a grateful look.

"Chevy woke me up," Max said simply. "Hard to sleep when she's going to town on that cat tree."

"Max, you were up so late," she said, sympathetic. "You should go catch some more Z's before you have to go."

"I'll be fine."

A lie if Chrissy had ever heard one. Coffee could only do so much. She chose to keep her mouth shut, instead taking a sip and a drag. As smoke filtered from her mouth, she let out a noisy sigh.

"Does that happen a lot?" she finally asked. "The night terrors, I mean."

"It used to be every night after he got out of the hospital," Max said quietly, flicking the ash from her cigarette. "Almost any time he slept. Neil slept in the basement for a while because he couldn't handle it. Think it gave him flashbacks, too. But now, it's not as bad, from what I can tell. Just happens sometimes, usually if he's stressed out or anxious."

"What do I do?" The question felt so childlike. "I can't... I can't call you every time it happens. I need to know how to help him. I was so scared and I felt like I couldn't do anything for him."

Max paused, running her hands through the tangled mess of copper on her head.

"Don't try to wake him up," she finally said. "Most of 'em just pass and he won't remember it at all. And it's hard to, anyway. He almost clocked me a few times."

"Jesus."

"If he wakes up like he did last night, talking to him really helps," Max continued, ignoring Chrissy's reaction. "Really quiet, so it

doesn't get him worked up again. I usually tell him I'm there, that he's okay. Stuff like that."

The amount of trust Billy had in Max astounded Chrissy. That she could bring him back from the hell in his mind, that he would follow her out. Again, she felt like an outsider. How could she be sure he would trust her the same? She realized now why Max was so hesitant to part from her older brother.

She couldn't let that burden sit on a girl who hadn't even seen her eighteenth birthday yet. God knows what it had already done to her.

"You're a good sister, you know that?" Chrissy said, tucking a piece of Max's long hair behind her ear. "Better one than I've ever been."

"I'm glad you're here," Max said, deflecting the compliment. "He's always better when he knows you're coming by. Even though he had an episode last night, he's still happy. And now you know how to handle it so it's, like... I have someone to share it with."

"Yeah," came her soft answer. "It's not all for you to deal with, Max. It never should've been."

Max looked down at the stained wood of the porch, seemingly to steady herself.

"I need a refill," she finally said, standing and putting out the cigarette in an overflowing ashtray. "You coming in?"

"Right behind you."

As they shuffled into the kitchen, the smell of breakfast filled her senses. Billy was awake, playing a dangerous game of frying bacon without a shirt on. Max couldn't help but snicker as she went to top off her coffee, scooting past him into the living room.

"Wow, living on the edge," Chrissy deadpanned, her smile betraying her. The mug sat on the counter with a *clink*.

Billy shrugged, flipping over a few pieces with tongs. "What's a few more scars, y'know?"

She came behind him, letting her fingers work at his back muscles. Billy let out an appreciative sigh, head hanging forward for a few moments. Chrissy gave a kiss to his back, tracing over the raised scar tissue.

“How’re you feeling?” The question was tentative, the words unsure of themselves as they hit the air.

“Like shit,” Billy admitted, eyes still focused on the pan. “I’m calling in today. The guys would rather me stay at home than be a safety hazard, anyway.”

“Poor baby,” she murmured, pressing another kiss to his back. “You were out cold last night. Any more dreams?”

“I don’t dream when I take that shit,” he answered, voice somber. “That’s the point. Brain kind of just... shuts off and I can rest.”

It almost gave her chills. “Oh.”

He was quiet for a bit, busying himself with finishing up the bacon. Chrissy refilled her mug, pouring in milk and sugar before leaning against the counter. Even in the beats between his revelation, it didn’t feel awkward. Just the two of them, spending a morning together while Max watched Regis and Kathie Lee. Like it was a natural transition from the night before, sweet and normal.

If this was to be her new normal, Chrissy didn’t mind it. It was a family she felt so wholly comfortable in, able to be herself without suppression.

She took in a sharp breath. *Family*. The thought that Billy and Max were, in her mind, family struck her as so wonderful and terrifying.

“Thanks for making coffee,” Billy said, interrupting her thoughts. “And feeding Chev. She bites when she doesn’t get fed right away.”

“Of course.” Chrissy beamed, fingers drumming against the edge of the counter. She watched as he maneuvered around her, cracking eggs into the pan. Billy leaned over, taking a taste of her lips. She could feel the hint of a smile on his face as he pulled away.

“You wanna do something today?” he asked, eyes flitting from the pan to her. “Y’know, get out of the house, go to the lake or something.”

“You said you feel like shit,” she said, eyebrows raising.

“I do,” he conceded, pushing curls from his face. “I’ll probably go back to sleep for a few hours after breakfast. But I don’t want you to feel cooped up all day.”

“Don’t push yourself, Billy.”

Another kiss graced her cheek. It honestly gave her butterflies when he chose to touch her so softly, almost chaste. For a moment, those baby blues seemed to search for something in her face — *answers, comfort, direction* — before crinkling into a smile.

“I won’t,” he said, taking one more kiss. “Grab some plates? Food’s done.”

19. tangerine dream

For how many times he had been in the Indianapolis airport the past few months, he had never actually been on a plane. Chrissy at least had done him a solid, flying up a few days before to make sure he was packed and to focus his mind more on the end goal than the journey.

It wasn't that he was afraid of flying. It was ruminating on the concept of a metal contraption weighing several hundred tons managing to remain in the atmosphere that gave him the willies. He had made the mistake one time of admitting the slight anxiety to Chrissy, who had explained the whole thing in such precise depth that it only managed to freak him out again. Billy thought it brave of her to, despite knowing every possibility of something failing, still love her job.

He had gotten on the plane, sat through the whole takeoff gripping his armrest and then Chrissy's hand when she noticed the tenseness in his being.

"You're gonna be fine," she whispered, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "The worst part is over."

"I don't believe you," he said through gritted teeth.

"You want a drink?" She set down her tray, watching as the flight attendant drew new. "We can get some."

"Do they have whiskey?"

"You don't need whiskey," Chrissy said, shooting him a look. As the flight attendant came to their row, she lit up. "Michelle, hey! Can we get a beer and whatever white wine you have?"

Although he grumbled at the choice, Billy had to admit the beer took some of the edge off. It helped not to get as irritated at the baby crying a few rows back as well. A part of him wanted to vow never to

get back on a plane, but knowing Chrissy, it would be an empty promise.

Billy could hardly believe it.

Three long, agonizing years of waiting, of nearly losing hope he'd ever see palms and adobe, and he was there.

California. San Diego.

Home.

The city seemed to sprawl out farther than before, more tightly packed amid palms and orange trees. It had grown, and he had grown too. They were old friends, but strangers all the same. Familiar yet full of newness that had yet to be explored.

And Chrissy. God bless her. She had snagged a hotel room right by Pacific Beach, so close to the ocean he could already see himself taking in the sunset on the sand.

He had never asked, but now wondered how many times Chrissy had seen the sunrise and sunset here. How often she thought of him as a pilot welcomed passengers to whatever city in California she had flown to.

It'd be different, Billy realized. For both of them. The sun would rise and set as it always did, but for the first time, they would see it together peeking through orange trees and sinking deep into the horizon of the ocean.

As they settled in, Billy couldn't contain his excitement anymore.

Chrissy was busy unpacking her things, pulling out her week's worth of clothes to stow in the dresser. With quick steps, he rushed over to her, pulling her into a hug from behind and lifting her into the air. Chrissy let out a yelp, laughing as he twirled her around to land on the bed. Chrissy gave a giggle, kissing him deeply. He returned the kiss, thumbing at her lip with a grin.

"We can unpack later," he said, voice chipper. "I wanna show you the beach I used to go to all the time."

It was like a wash of warmth over his soul.

His body has ached for this, whether he was aware or not. The crash of seawater against itself as it hit the shore was a song he had all but forgotten.

Chrissy had broken out her swimsuit, a yellow and black monokini, and made herself at home on the beach. She lay on her stomach on top of a beach towel, watching the waves roll in and out.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" he asked, breaking the silence between them. Chrissy looked back at him, eyes almost gold beneath her sunglasses, before giving a tiny smile.

"Gorgeous," she said in agreement.

"It looks even better on a board." Billy brushed some sand from his thigh. "We should surf. There's a place near here that rents boards."

Chrissy made a noise, head sinking into crossed arms. Billy leaned forward, letting his hand skin down her back.

"I don't know how," she said, voice small.

"So, you spent all that time in Florida and never *once* went surfing?" His eyebrow quirked upward, giving a teasing grin.

"I was busy!" she protested.

“Do you at least know how to do a pop up?”

“I *literally* have no clue what that is.”

Billy let out a laugh, the sound ringing clear and free. He pulled her in, giving a kiss to the top of her head.

“You’re gonna have to practice for a bit before I let you get in the water, chica,” he chuckled.

“Can’t I just watch you?” Chrissy asked, looking at him over the bridge of her sunglasses.

“You scared?”

“... A little.”

Billy tutted a little, letting Chrissy’s fingers entwine with his own.

“We could tandem surf,” he suggested, taking a long look at the waves. “You get on the board with me, I pop up first and then help you up. Just real easy waves. Nothing scary, promise.”

She looked skeptical, but nodded as she stood.

“Okay,” she agreed. “Can we just swim today, though?”

“Yeah.” He grunted as he joined her, feet sinking into warm sand. “Show me how expert a swimmer you apparently are now.”

“I *have* to be for my job, dingus.”

She dipped her toes in, wading out slightly into the water. Billy wasn’t far behind, taking great enjoyment out of watching the fabric of her swimsuit cling to her ass. She’d admitted once or twice to self-consciousness, no longer as lithe as she was in high school, but he didn’t see why. She didn’t look much different; the only time he ever truly noticed was when fingers would grip at her hips. They were softer, but he loved it. Loved every inch of her so much it made him nauseous sometimes.

“Stop staring, you perv,” she called out. A splash of water hit him in

the chest.

"Then don't wear something that makes me stare," he retorted, a smile pulling at his mouth.

He dove in, taking in the feeling of saltwater against his face, rippling through his hair, before surfacing next to Chrissy. She gave a squeak as water hit her, laughing as Billy pulled her by those beautiful hips towards him.

As he stood, he scooped her up into a bridal carry. Chrissy shrieked, clinging to him for dear life as it dawned on her what he was about to do. With little effort, Billy tossed her into the water, laughing as she spluttered to the surface.

"Your tits are out," he called out.

Chrissy gave a panicked look, then looked down. Nothing, just her cleavage pressing a little farther out than before. Her face stormed over, splashing a violent wave of water his direction.

"That's not funny!"

"It's funny to me," he called back sweetly.

Chrissy only flipped him off before treading water away from Billy. A few moments — *enough to let her cool off, he hoped* — and he made his way towards the brunette, hair shimmering under the Californian sun. She seemed to be glowing from within with her own light.

Billy, for the first time, realized how much he just wanted her to be in the sun like this. Content and genuinely happy, forever. He realized too, how much he wanted to be a part of it.

Forever.

At Chrissy's request — *insistence, actually* — Billy took her to one of

his old haunts. It was just as he remembered: loud, dirty, full of underage kids, friends of the band and twentysomethings who couldn't afford the beer at nicer joints. Chrissy seemed to revel in the chaos of it all. Seemed to pulse through the beat of every song Odin played.

"Dance with me," she whined, pulling at his wrist while trying to keep her beer from spilling.

"You really wanna dance to this?" he asked as he smirked.

"Yes," Chrissy said, defiant. "Dance with me or I'll find someone else to."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Try me." Her tone was joking, but knowing her, now with a few beers in her, it could become a very real possibility. Billy couldn't help but roll his eyes, letting her drag him further into the crowd.

The music seemed to pulsate through them, hard riffs and the banshee wail only a good metal band could produce. Chrissy was lost in it, bouncing around, out of place among the studs and denim, but so fully immersed that she became one with the rest of the crowd. Billy let it slowly take him over, yelling out the lyrics to a familiar song as he and Chrissy danced. The bar, all the nostalgia, seemed to seep back into him. He was 16 again, thrashing around with friends, hitting on girls a little too old for him, taken in by the wall of sound and the chaos of it all.

But now, he was with a girl he had held out for, feeling her grind against him as beer spilt out of his cup. Watching as she took in his former life, basked in the grunge and the bright neons. Any aversion to showing her this side of him melted, knowing there was no judgement. Just curiosity and a desire to integrate herself into what he loved.

As he glanced near the busted stage, a familiar face caught his eye. The man seemed to take a second before it dawned on him that Billy was familiar too.

“Shit.”

“What?” Chrissy asked, trying to look in the direction of Billy’s gaze. “Something happen?”

“Billy?” A familiar tenor voice rang out, gritty from the yelling. “Dude, Hargrove, is that you?”

Rhett, one of his oldest friends, was elbowing his way towards the couple. Bleach blonde and a head taller than Billy was, he was the poster child of the glam metal movement in San Diego.

“Shit, man, it is you,” Rhett said as he finally made it to them. “It’s been *years* .”

“Yeah, it’s me,” Billy answered, feeling Chrissy press into his side. “Didn’t think you’d still be hanging around this shithole, Rhett.”

“Well, I’m friends with a couple guys in the band. End up here more than you’d think,” he explained, giving a glance at Chrissy. “Who’s the arm candy?”

“A girl who needs another beer,” she said, a cheeky grin on her face.

“Chrissy,” Billy added, draping his arm around her shoulder. “My girl. Kept telling her we’d visit Cali together and here we are.”

“They make ‘em that cute in bumfuck nowhere?” Rhett asked, eyebrows raised.

Chrissy gave a giggle as Billy pulled her closer. Rhett seemed to get the idea, but couldn’t keep a smirk off his face. He’d always gotten Billy’s sloppy seconds, and it seemed the thought process had been leftover from high school.

“Only this one. Just got lucky.”

“Chrissy, was it?” he asked.

“Yeah, and you’re... Rhett, right?” she asked, leaning in to hear him over the start of the next set.

“Mhm. Chrissy, you want to know a secret about this bastard?”

Don't you fucking dare. Billy shot daggers at the bleach blonde man, who ignored it.

“You are his type to a T,” Rhett grinned, slapping Billy on the shoulder. “You sure he didn’t grow you in a lab or something? The only thing missing is blonde hair.”

“Blonde hair?” Chrissy raised her eyebrows, seemingly amused by this revelation.

“Oh yeah. Hargrove’s always had a thing for blondes.”

“Do you think I’d look good blonde, Billy?” she teased, pressing closer to him. “I wanna make sure I stay your *dream girl*, you know.”

He let out a sigh through his nose as he glared at Rhett. “Just go get yourself another beer, Chris.”

“Yes *sir*, ” she said enthusiastically, kissing his cheek before meandering off to the bar.

Left standing with Rhett, Billy felt an awkwardness seep into his being. He hated it, hated feeling like the person who had known him for so long and so we’ll was now a stranger.

“So, you’re gonna give me shit for being here when you do the same? With a nice girl?” he asked as someone shoulder checked him. “Hey! Watch it, dipshit.”

“She wanted to,” Billy shrugged, taking out a cigarette. “Chris is on this big kick of wanting to see what I used to do before Hawkins.”

“Bet she’s *real* impressed.”

“Warned her it wasn’t much.”

“Should’ve taken her to LA, man. She’d dig the whole Hollywood vibe.”

“She’s already seen it,” Billy said, lighting up. “She flies for a living.

LA's nothin' compared to places she's been."

"So she flies and you what?" Rhett laughed. "Hold up, your girl had the right idea about another beer."

"Fix cars." Billy grinned, following Rhett to the bar. He slapped down a dollar, opting for another beer himself.

"You still got the Camaro?"

Billy nodded, catching a glimpse of Chrissy at the far end of the bar. She'd apparently decided against the beer, instead pounding back the first of three shots while the bartender goaded her on.

"Where are the other guys?" he asked. "What's Nate up to?"

Rhett blinked. "Nate bit it a few years ago, man."

The news hit him harder than he thought. How someone he had spent years with could be gone, unbeknownst to him. If he hadn't made it, would it have been the same story? Would anyone here even care that he had died?

"No shit. What happened?"

"That new disease that got big the last few years. Don't think he was out doing queer stuff, think it was the needles. Fucker turned into a total junkie, man."

"Shit," Billy said under his breath. "What about Kellen? He still around?"

"Unfortunately." Rhett traded a dollar bill for his beer. "Guy's a total prick."

"He was always a prick."

"Yeah, well, this is a whole new level. Turns out he's more like his dad than he thought."

Billy knew full well what that meant. Kellen's dad, the few times he had the displeasure of being around him, was drunk almost

constantly. When he wasn't, he was passed out in his own vomit somewhere along Market Street.

"You got out at the right time, Hargrove," Rhett said, rubbing at his eye with his knuckle. "Who the fuck knows what you'd be up to if your dad didn't haul you off to... where was it again?"

"Hawkins. Indiana." Billy tapped the side of his beer can, watching as Chrissy chatted up a girl who looked like she belonged in a goth club rather than here. "And I don't know, man. You seem like you've got your shit together."

His friend let out a laugh, throaty and almost bitter.

"If you call working two part time jobs while tryin' to book gigs 'together', sure. I'm sleepin' on my ex's couch because she felt *sorry* for me."

Billy shifted, unsure of what to say back. Maybe Rhett was right. Hawkins had seemed like a death sentence, had almost become one, but knowing who he had been, the trajectory of his path before Hawkins, he may as well have been dead.

Rhett at least had dreams. Always had, ever since they were kids. Although he partied just as hard as the rest of the guys in Billy's friend group, he was serious about music. Maybe that had been his saving grace.

What would mine have been? Billy thought. He couldn't think of anything. Hawkins had been his unwilling savior.

"So, uh," Rhett said, nodding at his chest. "Where'd the scar come from? Looks gnarly as fuck."

"Shark bite."

"Be serious, man."

"Accident," Billy said, wondering if the word had come out too quickly. "Big fire happened at our mall and I almost bit it trying to help Max and a few of her friends."

Rhett's eyes widened.

"Shit, they give a medal for those heroics?" He took a swig of his beer. "How is Max? She still a little bitch or she grow out of it?"

"Grew out of it for the most part," he answered. "We got close after the accident. She's a good kid, knows how to party."

His friend gave a hearty laugh, taking another drink. "She learned from the best, huh?"

"You bet," Billy grinned. "Heard she beat my keg stand record and everything."

As the two continued to talk, Billy felt his walls melt, the apprehension of before gone. He felt bad, not having kept up with Rhett all these years. But if Billy had learned anything, it was that lost time could be made up for quickly with the right people. Another two beers came and went; into the crowd they dove, thrashing about as they did in high school to the band that had started after the opener.

It wasn't until Billy muscled his way out of the crowd for another cigarette that he realized Chrissy hadn't been seen for a while. He had always appreciated that she was able to entertain herself, make acquaintances and not be attached at his side when partying. But this was different. From how much he had seen her drink, and how new this place was to her, it could spell disaster. His stomach turned to lead as he glanced around, unable to see the brunette bouncing around the room any longer.

"Shit," he said under his breath. "Did you see where she went, Rhett?"

"Huh?"

"Chris. I don't see her."

Rhett glanced around. "Bathroom maybe? Or outside?"

He groaned, rubbing at the bridge of his nose as he winced. "She's a goner if she went outside."

Billy pressed through the crowded bar, elbowing to the entrance. The brunette was nowhere to be seen, definitely not out front. Rhett had gone off deeper into the bar, asking around for her. When panic was about to set in, a smack to his back came, startling him.

It was Chrissy, hair now in a small ponytail at the back of her neck with a scrunchie she hadn't come with. She seemed to materialize out of nowhere, far more drunk than when Billy had last spotted her.

"Billy!" she called out, words slurring. "Billy, there's this guy named Odin from the band—"

"That is the band, babe."

"— and he said he'd share his coke with me if I showed him my boobs. And I *kind* of want to? Do you think he'd share with you too?"

"You're not doing coke, Chris. You're too drunk."

"He's got pot too."

Billy pondered that for a moment before shaking off the temptation. "Rhett's gonna hook us up later, babe. No coke or pot from a dude you don't know."

"What're you, my dad?" she groaned, pushing against him.

"I think it's time to head back," he said, gentle as to not rouse her into some aggressive state. It was always a mixed bag with Chrissy; sometimes she was easily swayed in her drunken state, other times incredibly combative.

"I don't want to." Her lips formed a pout, eyes trying hard to focus on his face. "I don't get to party anymore because I'm always fuckin' working. Let me have *fun*, Billiam."

Rhett muscled through the crowd, looking relieved.

"Oh, good, you found her," he said. "You look like hell, Chris."

"Billy's trying to make me leave."

"That might be a good plan, sugar," Rhett said slowly.

"You should come back with us!" came her declaration, followed by a gleeful clap. "You, me, and Billy. I bet it'd be fun."

Billy's eyebrows screwed together. "Chris, seriously, we need to go."

"Have you ever had a threesome, Rhett?" she asked suddenly. Eyes bright and glassy, lit up as if her idea was one worthy of a nobel prize. "You should come with us. We can try it."

"No," Billy said forcefully, before Rhett could do anything but decline. "Chris, you're drunk. We gotta go."

"I don't want—"

"Yeah, I know." He was starting to get impatient with her. "We can party tomorrow night. And the night after. Just get your ass back to the hotel right now."

"I'm not tired."

"Yes you are. Rhett, grab a cab, will ya?"

"You want me to come back with you guys?" Rhett teased.

"You so much think about it, I will introduce your face to the concrete," Billy shot back, narrowing his eyes. Rhett held up his hands, backing down with a grin.

"Kidding, kidding. I'll grab a cab."

"Billy," Chrissy said, leaning against him with an unsteady gait. "Will you fuck me when we get back?"

He hesitated. Normally, he would jump at the chance when she was drunk, but he would also usually be at her level. Right now, he was pleasantly buzzed, still sober enough to know Chrissy was too far gone to enjoy any of it.

"We'll see," he lied. "You doin' okay?"

"That last shot was nasty," she said, ignoring his question. "I think it was Everclear. Just straight up burned."

"Why'd you drink it, then, stupid?" he asked, annoyed.

"Bartender was nice and let me have it for free," she answered, eyes drifting to the stage. "Hey! Odin is singing again!"

"C'mon, pretty girl," Billy coaxed, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Let's get you home."

The first thing she realized when she awoke was that her head felt too big for her body. too heavy, every pulse felt tenfold. The events of last night were hazy after her third shot. She could remember the band, talking to the lead singer during their set break. A girl dressed head to toe in black that seemed to vibe with her. Billy's friend Rhett, teasing her and then helping her into a cab.

The second thing she realized was that Billy was gone from the bed. She opened her eyes, trying to prop herself up on her elbows until her head started to spin. Chrissy recoiled at the light filtering in. She hadn't felt this hungover in *years* .

The door clicked, then the shuffle of feet and gentle thunk of something on the table came. She wasn't sure how much time passed between waking and when Billy's voice sounded out.

"You finally up?" came Billy's voice, soft but slightly amused. Lovely and hoarse from the night before.

"Unfortunately," Chrissy answered with a groan. "What time is it?"

"Ten. Went out for a walk and got coffee and donuts."

"Gimme." she stretched out her hand, flailing for the promised coffee.

Billy laughed. The bed sunk under his weight before a kiss pressed to

her shoulder.

"You gotta sit up first."

Chrissy let out another noise. With great effort, and some help from Billy, she sat up, combing her fingers through the rat's nest her hair had become.

"Do you remember anything from last night?"

"Uh..." She hesitated, looking him in the eyes, trying to figure out what he was getting at. "I remember doing shots with the lead singer from that band that played. And dancing. And Rhett. Why?"

Billy tried his best not to smile, taking a drink of his coffee.

"Nothing," he said calmly. "Just that you tried to have a threesome with me and Rhett."

"You're *kidding*," she groaned. Back down into the mattress she went, covering her face with her pillow. "Billy, are you serious?"

"Completely."

"I did *not*."

"Oh, sunshine, you did," he chuckled, pulling the pillow from her face. He placed a kiss on her forehead. "He was all for it, by the way."

"Of course he was," she muttered, rubbing at her eyes. "Fuck, that's embarrassing."

"You also—" he snickered, running his hand down his face. "You also almost took coke from the lead singer of the band we saw."

"Stop!" she howled, giving a pained laugh. "You're lying. You're so lying."

"I wish I was." Billy slid into bed next to her, brushing a few pieces of hair from her face. She wondered if she had even taken off her makeup the night before. How big a mess she looked right now.

Billy's gaze was loving, amused; there was no indication from him that she looked anything less than her best.

"I bet you hate me right now," Chrissy whined, pouting her lip out. "About the whole thing with Rhett."

"You were hammered," he shrugged. "I've done worse things while drunk than that."

"He is really cute though."

"I don't hang out with uggos."

That got a laugh out of Chrissy before she winced from the sound. She rolled over, giving him the most serious look she could. It seemed to unnerve him a little, hand drawing back from her hair.

"Question."

"I already don't like this," he said.

"If we did try a... threesome," she said slowly, "would it be with Rhett?"

"Are you still drunk?" His eyes narrowed, search her face for any clue.

"I wish," Chrissy griped, face planting into her pillow. "Answer the question."

"I'd rather take the weird girl in black you were talking to."

"That wasn't the question. Yes or no on Rhett?"

Billy winced, letting out a long groan.

"If I had to pick a guy, sure." He looked up at the ceiling, tapping his fingers on his chest. "But I think you just wanna fuck Rhett, Chris."

"That's not— *no*, I don't," came her defensive answer, blanket coming up over her head. "I just was curious."

"I can call him up right now," Billy said calmly, a devilish glint in his

eye.

Chrissy's eyes widened as he leaned over, reaching for the phone on the nightstand. She let out a shriek, crawling on top of him to wrestle his hand back to her. Billy started to cackle, nearly turning red as he lost it over her reaction.

"I hate you," she said. "I hate you so much."

"Love you too," he said back with a satisfied smile.

"I don't want to fuck Rhett, okay?" Chrissy added, feeling her face grow hot.

"I know." Hands settled on her thighs, rubbing upwards until they slipped under the thin cotton of her shirt. "Wanna fuck *you*, though. There's just something so cute about you when you get flustered."

"I need coffee and a shower first," she said, the words lacking any conviction as his fingers grazed her chest. "I bet I look like a mess."

From his teasing smile, she knew she was right. Billy looked untouched by the previous night, like California had imbued him with immunity to anything she was feeling right now. With his gold tan and sun-bleached head of curls, he belonged here. Thrived here. She hated how long it took to bring him back.

"You do," he conceded, lighting up as she shuddered when his thumb grazed a now erect nipple. "But I still want you. I'm always gonna want you."

20. under the orange tress

There was no going back.

The board had been rented, and Billy's excitement was so palpable that Chrissy couldn't bear to squash it by her own fears. She had at least made it worth her while, purchasing a new swimsuit that had a little more insurance in case she wiped out.

A deep breath, and she watched Billy go through the motion of a pop-up again.

"You make it look so easy," Chrissy complained, arms crossed in front of her.

"Because this part is easy. Get on the board."

"Do I have to?"

"Chris," he warned, peering over his sunglasses. "Get on the board."

With a groan, she shuffled over, standing on top of the surfboard. It was pretty, a mix of pale cream and a yellow-orange gradient following the curve of the wood. All she could imagine was hitting her head on it, falling into the ocean. Making a complete fool of herself in front of Billy.

Not like I haven't done worse this week. She cringed, taking a deep breath.

Rhett had come by the afternoon after her drunken proposition at the bar, and had said nothing of it. Just gave them the weed he had promised, hung out and asked her question after question about Hawkins, about Tallahassee, about flying. He seemed to be so genuine and sweet, the total opposite of what Chrissy had imagined a person who called Billy their best friend to be. Seeing Billy talking so casually and openly with someone besides her or Max was strange, but welcome. There was a beautiful simplicity to that afternoon.

Billy could see the hesitation in her entire being. He cupped her face, giving a gentle kiss.

“Just try, okay?” he coaxed, blue eyes mirroring the color of the sea.

It took a few tries, a lot of coaching, but finally he seemed to be content with the fluidity of her pop-up. Next, he stood behind her, showing her how he'd stand first, then help her up. Slowly, her nerves left her. The mellow aura around him and tender way he held her hand soothed Chrissy, gave her the resolve to let him show this part of his world he had never been able to.

It was a small wave, maybe two feet tall at most. She felt the board move, Billy now upright. It was her turn. Quickly, she brought herself to her knees, feeling Billy's hand on her waist, then the other on her arm to steady her as she gained her footing. A glance back, and she knew everything was okay.

Billy was beaming, his hand still gripping her wrist to keep her from swaying too much. The pride he had in her filled her soul to the brim.

“Easy, right?” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

“Yeah,” Chrissy said back, glancing forward once again. Watching as other waves rippled beside them, pushing them closer and closer to the shore. “I get why you like it now.”

As the wave slowly dissipated into a gentle push, Billy helped her back down to the board. Chrissy let her feet dangle in the water as he sat behind her. His nose pressed into the crook of her neck as he kissed her.

“You did so good.” Another kiss. “So, so good.”

“Can we do another?” Chrissy asked, turning to look at him. The request made the blonde perk up, almost childlike in his glee.

“We can do a bigger wave, if you feel up to it.” From the sound of his voice, he was itching to do so anyway. “Promise you won't wipe out.”

“Promise?”

"I'll keep you safe," he said, the lilt of his voice sweet.

As they rode the next wave, maybe a foot higher than the last, Chrissy felt herself soaring. The ocean carried them back to calmer water, laughter from the both of them mixing with the crash of water against the shore. She tired of it after a few more waves, opting instead to sit on the beach as Billy went back out by himself.

She was left in awe. Chrissy wasn't certain how many years had passed between the last time Billy had surfed and now, but he managed to hold his own with the rest of the surfers. Rode waves she was too terrified to ever come close to, weaving in and out like it was second nature.

Surfing for Billy must be what flying was to her, Chrissy realized. A surreal experience, part of nature in almost a whimsical way. He was water, she was sky. Two forces of nature that ran parallel to one another, lovely and symbiotic. Never quite touching until the eye found the horizon, and there they would create something beautiful.

There would be sunsets in that horizon for them, their melded colors creating something wonderful and almost magic.

Chrissy wondered if he knew that she knew. That if he was aware Max had given her the lowdown on his meds, what did what, when he was supposed to take them so she could help keep him accountable. That his Valium was essentially for emergencies, not for a sleeping aid as he had been using it the past few nights.

She contemplated all this as he grabbed at his pill bottle, shaking out a single yellow pill.

"You know you can tell me if you aren't doing okay, right?" Chrissy asked. There was a sadness in her voice she couldn't hide.

"I'm fine," he said, blue eyes staring directly into hers. "This just works better for the trip."

Chrissy shifted in the bed, still not buying his answer. Billy gave a small sigh, pushing sandy locks from his face as he climbed into bed with her.

"It's better this way," he insisted, propping himself up on his elbow. "No nightmares."

"No dreams," she answered, staring at that beautiful face of his. The scar on his eyebrow was starting to fade to a creamy white against the tan of his skin.

Billy's face flinched into something resembling shame, only to go back to it's calm, collected default. Unbothered by her concern.

"I don't need to dream." Fingers swept at her hairline, pushing through a few waves. "This week feels enough like one."

"Billy—"

"Chris, seriously," he interrupted, a frown settling on his face. "It's fine. I'll go back to takin' my Prazosin tomorrow if it bothers you that much."

"It does." Fingers gripped at the sheet she had covered herself with, knuckles finding their way to white. She pulled it to cover her face, eyes squeezed shut as Billy's hand pulled away from her hair. "I just want you to be honest with me if you're not feeling good."

She felt him shift away, hearing a low rumble of frustration coming from his side of the bed. It was the last thing she wanted, an argument when there had been such bliss the past few days.

"I'm being honest," he said quietly. "I'm fine. I just don't want to scare you again. Not while we're here and it's just you and me."

The grip on the sheet loosened. Chrissy peeked out from under it, feeling her heart thudding away in her chest. Billy looked defeated.

"I'm not scared," she finally said earnestly. "I just want you to be okay."

There was a softness to his face that hadn't been there a moment ago.

An understanding. Still, it was mixed with a tinge of sadness that Chrissy wasn't sure Billy was aware of.

"You're here," he replied simply. "So I feel better than okay."

As he promised, Billy switched back to his regular sleep medication. It was a relief to her, and seemingly to him as the nights continued to be blissfully quiet. He only seemed to wake in the night when she needed him, desperate for his skin against hers. A passing thought one morning came of whether the suite next or above them were growing tired of the passionate noise coming from their room. But it was only passing; Chrissy couldn't give a fuck when it came down to it. Vacation meant she could let loose.

They had decided to go for a walk, far outside the Gaslamp District and away from the throngs of tourists. Chrissy was thankful she had worn comfortable shoes; the trek was far and the heat was starting to bear down on them.

"There's a 7-11 the next block up," Billy said, taking a drag of his cigarette before handing it to her. "We can get a Slurpee or something."

"That sounds amazing right now." Her throat was starting to dry out. Normally, she would've complained by now, but the sheer awe at seeing Billy's old neighborhood, knowing he grew up surrounded by sun and citrus, kept her mute. "You sure they'll have it? It's pretty hot today."

"They never run out there," he grinned. "You know how many times I've stolen a fuckin' Slurpee from that place? I'm surprised they didn't ban me."

"Wow, *such* a rebel."

He shrugged, pushing one of the strands of hair that had fallen from

his ponytail from his face.

“Not the worst thing I’ve done here by a mile,” he said.

To his credit, Billy was somewhat right about the store never running out. The Slurpee machine was lacking maintenance, barely functional but still dispensing enough of the blue raspberry to fill two large cups.

“Your lips are blue,” Billy noted, chuckling.

“So’s your tongue,” she grinned.

As she spoke, his tongue peeked out between white teeth, a teasing look in his eyes. Before she could react to stop him, Billy leaned over, dragging his tongue up her cheek. Chrissy let out a squeal, pushing him away as he cackled.

“Why are you so *gross*?!” she shrieked, rubbing away the spit he had left behind.

“Bummer,” Billy smirked. “Was hoping I had enough to stain your face.”

“So gross.” Chrissy rolled her eyes, taking another drink of her Slurpee. “Hey, are we close to your old house at all?”

He raised his hand, giving a so-so gesture. “Pretty close. Maybe another fifteen minutes. Why? You wanna see it?”

“Duh,” she deadpanned, giving a cheeky smile.

The walk was more pleasant, now shaded by cypress and orange trees. Billy had stopped in front of one of his old neighbor’s house, picking a few tangerines from the tree. It seemed almost unconscious, an action repeated a hundred times before she had ever come into the picture. Ripe citrus filled her nose as he peeled at one, placing wedges in both their mouths as he pointed out landmarks. Where he had broke his arm falling out of a tree. Rhett’s family house. The middle school he and Max had attended.

“There,” Billy said, pointing at a tan house as he came to a stop.

“That’s our old house.”

Chrissy vaguely recognized it from a few family pictures at the Hargrove’s house. It was slightly worn down, the roof definitely having seen better days. A small flower bed sat in front of the bay window, a mess of fauna that didn’t necessarily go together crowding each other for space.

“Wonder who lives there now,” she mused.

“Some family from Blythe,” he shrugged. “Wasn’t a great house to start out with, but it’s their problem now.”

“Did you always live here?” She gazed up at the blonde; his focus was entirely on the house, face almost blank. “Like, before your parents split?”

“Nah.” He dug into his pocket, lighting a cigarette before handing over the pack to her. “My folks lived in a different part of the city. I’d take you, but I don’t remember the address.”

“That’s okay.”

“It was nicer than this place,” he said wistfully. “More trees. My mom had a little garden out back and everything.”

Chrissy realized his mom had rarely come up in conversation. Bits and pieces of her personality came into focus sometimes, only to fall into the haze of the turmoil of his childhood. Her absence felt like a bottomless hole, no end to questions about her that Billy would have been too young to gain the answers to.

“Do you ever think about finding her?” She slipped her hand into his, giving it a soft squeeze.

“On and off.” Billy squeezed her hand back, taking a drag of his cigarette. “Not sure if she’d want me to, though.”

“I bet she would.”

“I think she’d take one look at me and run the other way.” He let out a bitter chuckle under his breath. “Spent too many years with only

my dad. I wouldn't want to deal with a kid who was raised by him either."

"You aren't like him at all, though," Chrissy protested.

"Only 'cause I'm trying hard not to be," Billy answered, his voice quieter than before. "He's like a fucking cancer, Chris. Just spreads and spreads inside you and it takes everything to kill it off."

She got quiet after that. Leaned against him, letting out a lengthy sigh as they stared at the worn little ranch house.

"I think you've done a good job," she finally said, breaking the silence that had been filled with leaves rustling and far-off traffic. "I don't think there's a speck of him left in you."

Billy had slowly run out of things to show Chrissy that piqued her interest. She had seen some of the bigger tourist traps, really only wanting to get the 'full experience' of what it was like to live in San Diego. He really didn't have much of an answer to that. While his family hadn't been poor, they also didn't have the extra money to throw at anything more than the occasional fun park. Hell, even his own amusements consisted of the same few bars and clubs that never carded and trips down to Tijuana when he and his friends had pooled together enough money for gas.

So, when Rhett mentioned he had a gig that Friday, Billy was more than grateful for something to do. Honestly, he was curious. Rhett had made little mention of his band besides him playing lead guitar and the singer sounding eerily like Robert Plant. His friend had always been a bit of a braggart; if he was keeping mum it either meant his band fucking sucked and he knew it or they were such a well-kept secret that Billy would have experience it live.

"This place is nice," Chrissy noted, clinging to Billy's arm as she watched the crowd filter into the venue with calm eyes. "I mean, they

have to be good if they can draw a crowd in a place like this.”

“You might be right,” he murmured. “That or everybody here is tone deaf. Let’s hope it’s not that.”

The venue *was* nice. Looked like it had been renovated quite recently. How long it would last that way would be the question, especially with all the metal-heads filtering in.

His thoughts were broken by the loud shred of a guitar. A pause, and the first song hit him like a freight train. Rhett hadn’t been lying; the singer, a willowy man with enough style to send Nikki Sixx running with his tail between his legs, wailed out amid the chugging guitars and manic drumming.

What Billy could remember of Rhett’s guitar skill was fuzzy, but it had always been decent. He’d been playing since Billy had moved to the neighborhood with his dad. Now though, it was like a whole different person was on stage. He owned the fucking stage, jumping around without missing a beat once his solo came up. There was a small pang of jealousy, that someone he knew could have a skill that could get an entire crowd cheering and bouncing along with, but it quickly was squashed by sheer pride in the man he called his best friend.

Chrissy had thrown herself fully into the music, downing her beer in between songs. Her excitement was infectious, as was the energy from the band. It didn’t take long for Billy to join in. Chrissy shrieked as they began a cover of *I Wanna Be Your Dog*, belting out the lyrics. It was a rainbow of hair bobbing up and down as the crowd seemed to headbang almost in sync, hands flying up as a chorus of voices yelled out the song.

As the set wore on, cigarettes and alcohol passed between hands, the world becoming fuzzy and, if Billy was honest, more tolerable. Chrissy had managed to stick close to him the entire time, despite her penchant for wandering off after a few drinks.

He was glad she hadn’t done so. While in the middle of a conversation about sub-genres of metal, a hand brushed against Chrissy’s chest, squeezing hard at one of her breasts. Chrissy’s face

went a deep red, eyebrows furrowing as she whipped her head around.

“The fuck?!” she yelled over the music. “What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“C’mon, honey,” the culprit, an equally drunk asshole said. “You think I’m gonna pass up the opportunity to touch them tits?”

Billy never understood the term ‘seeing red’; when his anger got control of him, it was a white hot rage. Blinding and colorless, searing his entire being. And that rage gave the asshole who dared to grope his girl a shove, pushing him to the floor. The people surrounding them looked on, some gasping as Billy’s rage grew.

“You think that’s funny?” he yelled, kicking at the man’s side. “Get the fuck up. I’ll show you what’s funny.”

“If she didn’t want me to feel her up, she should’ve worn a real shirt,” the man protested, standing up before shoving at Billy.

“Half the dudes here aren’t even *wearing* shirts,” Billy continued to yell. “You gonna touch their tits? Or just a girl who can’t fuckin’ fight back?”

“Billy—” Chrissy tried to interject.

He ignored her, instead opting to throw a punch at the man’s face. It barely connected, his body too inebriated to coordinate properly.

“Man, I’m sorry! Just back off!” came the man’s sniveling over the music.

As he steadied himself to try again, he felt hands on his arm, pulling him back towards the bar. Chrissy had gotten ahold of him, red-faced but somewhat proud, from what he could tell. As they settled against a wall, Billy let out a long, frustrated sigh.

“Hate that shit,” he slurred. “Fuckers think just ‘cause you have a nice rack that it’s free game.”

“Just forget it, Billy.”

"I had to go *weeks* before you let me touch 'em, they think they can just waltz up and have at it?" Billy continued, getting himself worked up again. "Fuck no. I earned 'em."

His self-righteous tirade apparently was funny to her. Chrissy burst out into a fit of giggles, burying herself into his chest. Eyebrows creased in confusion, then frustration.

"You could've touched my boobs the second day you drove me home," she finally managed to say. "I would've let you. I would've let you do a lot of things."

"That would've been helpful to know, like, three years ago," he retorted. "Tease."

"Who's a tease?"

Billy and Chrissy both turned towards the voice. Rhett, now far more sweaty and full of makeup than either had seen before, was standing there, lit cigarette dangling from his lips. It almost annoyed Billy how smug he looked.

"Chris," he replied, pulling the cigarette from Rhett's mouth and taking a drag as his friend frowned. "Made me put in all this work to fuck her and *now* she says I didn't have to."

"Nice," Rhett replied, giving Chrissy a grin as he snatched back his cigarette. "Way to keep this asshole on his toes. He always got it too easy, ya know?"

"I did not."

"Did too. Even now, bet you if you tried to pick some chick up here, she'd come home with you."

"Ew," Chrissy chimed in, her face scrunching up. "Maybe California girls are just sluts."

"Big talk coming from you," Billy drawled. Hair fell in his face as he dug in his pocket for his pack of Reds. That one drag left him needed more. He felt a sting on his arm as Chrissy smacked him.

"You're so mean," came her indignant reply.

He glanced up, seeing a pout on her sweet face. A chuckle, and he gave her a kiss, pulling at her bottom lip. Whatever irritation she had seemed to melt a bit, hormones and alcohol a dangerous combination with them.

Rhett groaned, smoke filtering from his nose. "Get a room, you two."

"We have one," Billy said, almost no beat between his and Rhett's words. "Too bad you aren't invited back to it."

"Jesus, Billy, let it go," Chrissy groaned, rolling her eyes. "Rhett, your band's really awesome. Seriously, we don't have *anything* like that in Hawkins or Tallahassee."

"California magic, sugar," he grinned. "We're a whole other breed here, aren't we, Hargrove?"

Billy shrugged, giving a small smile as he lit up a cigarette. Rhett wasn't *wrong*. There was something the people had here that couldn't be replicated anywhere else. They rocked better, partied better, fucked better for the most part. The beauty of possibility imbued California's residents with a sense of weightlessness and candor.

"Shit," Rhett said, checking the stage as his band-mates filed back on. "Round two. If you aren't passed out after the set, we should hang."

"Sure thing."

His arm draped around Chrissy's shoulders, handing off his cigarette to her. She seemed in awe again of the sheer amount of people cheering as the band started up another song.

"You wanna get some fresh air?" he asked, trying to catch her gaze. "Think I drank too much. Need to clear my head a little."

"You *definitely* drank too much," she replied, honey and olive zeroing in on his face. "I'm feeling cramped, anyway."

The cement outside the venue was cooler than he expected after such a hot day. It didn't seem to matter; heat radiated off their bodies as

Chrissy drew close to kiss him. Another kiss, then another, blooming into a lazy exchange as the music pumped on inside the venue. Chrissy drew away, lipstick almost completely gone from her mouth. Billy wondered how much of it had made it onto his own lips. How stupid he must look right now with baby pink lipstick smeared on him.

"You ever think about moving back?" she asked, teasing a frayed patch of denim on his leg. "I haven't seen you this relaxed in forever."

"Would you live here?" Billy asked back, eyebrow quirking up as he licked his lips.

"Maybe."

"Then maybe I'd move back," he said simply. "Doesn't matter where we end up. I just want to be in the same place as you."

"You mean live together?" Chrissy's eyes got wide, the mascara around the corners of her eyes clumping from heat and sweat.

"I've been asking you for months to move in with me." His fingers flicked gently at her green earring. "If I gotta move somewhere in Cali, or Tallahassee or—"

"Or Chicago?" she asked, hopeful.

"Or Chicago," Billy echoed. "If I gotta move somewhere to get you to do it, fine. Just hate having you so far away all the time."

"I hate being so far all time," she mumbled. "I just can't go back to Hawkins, Billy."

"I know."

"We both deserve better than that place," she continued, taking his hand in hers.

He reveled in her skin against his, in how her fingers filled the spaces between his so perfectly that it seemed they were cut from the same cloth, parted only to be sewn together with care.

“I know,” he repeated, feeling his voice crack slightly.

But did he deserve better? Chrissy did, it was that obvious to him. She was bigger than Hawkins could handle, neon against pastel and beige. She had followed an upwards trajectory while he had stalled. Around her, he could see glimmers of his old self, brash and electric. He loved it, savored the return to vibrancy.

It felt all these years, he had been repenting for the death and misery that had flourished in his weakness. Hawkins was his purgatory, and Billy wasn't sure if he was worthy to leave it just yet. He could be better. He *would* be better.

He just hoped Chrissy would wait until he had paid his debt.

21. heart shaped bed

Despite his deep hatred of airplanes, Billy was back on one for the third time in two months.

He had bought his ticket after Chrissy had given him her schedule for November. She had gotten lucky; one of her weeks off had fallen on her birthday. With it was Billy's chance to surprise her, excuses why he couldn't make it carefully crafted by himself and Max. Even Chrissy's dad and stepmom had gotten in on it, convincing Chrissy to stay in Florida with the promise of a family trip.

It was the asscrack of dawn when he finally touched down. Partly planned, so he could further surprise Chrissy, partly due to the affordability of his ticket. After he had found his luggage, Billy made his way outside, searching for anyone who resembled Chrissy in any way. He was lucky; James apparently recognized him immediately, no doubt from pictures shown by Chrissy.

There was a hug he wasn't quite expecting, warm and filled with the scent of cigarettes and sandalwood. Billy couldn't remember the last time another man had hugged him. Even when leaving California, Rhett hadn't done so, merely wished him good luck and punched him in the shoulder.

James' car was a green pickup truck, beaten to hell but with so much leg room Billy nearly cried from relief. He was so tired of sitting at that point, but the airport was thankfully only fifteen minutes from the Chapman's neighborhood.

"She has no clue?" Billy asked.

"Nope," James drawled. "She's been moping around the house all week. Driving me and Lisa bananas. Almost told her just to get her to stop."

Billy let out a chuckled. "Sounds like Chrissy."

“She lights up after she talks to you,” her dad continued, eyes flitting up to the rear view mirror then to him. “It’ll be nice seeing her happy like that for a while. She hasn’t been miserable since she moved, but I can tell she’s not as happy as she could be. Wish I could fix it.”

“Tell her to move back to Hawkins, then,” he said with a little smile.

James laughed. “No way, buddy. Wouldn’t wish that place on anybody.”

There was a pause, the rush of a few cars in the nearly empty expressway filling the quiet. Billy wanted to turn on the radio just to fill it, but decided against it.

“You ever think about getting out?” James asked, breaking the silence. “Teenie doesn’t really talk about future plans past a few months when it comes to you two.”

“Yeah,” Billy answered, staring at the dashboard. “Think about it all the time.”

“My door’s always open,” James said, clearing his throat. “It’s not California, but we have waves on the east coast. And no snow.”

Billy gave a wistful smile. “Thanks.”

“I reserve the right to take back my invitation if you’re a terrible house guest, though.” James cracked a smile, turning onto an exit ramp.

Her dad’s house had a different beauty than her mother’s house in Hawkins. Less elegant, more homey and artistic. Almost eclectic. Billy set down his luggage, a borrowed suitcase from Susan, and pulled off his leather jacket, placing it carefully on the coat rack. As he did, a cocker spaniel ran towards him, nails clicking on wood floors. He couldn’t help but smile wide, bending down to let it sniff him.

“Nina, no jumping,” James scolded quietly. “Just push her off if she’s annoying you.”

“It’s fine,” Billy answered, nose wrinkling as Nina licked at his face.

A woman with fire-engine red hair — *Lisa, he realized* — sat in the kitchen with a mug of coffee, reading the newspaper. She lit up when she saw her husband and Billy, bringing a finger to her lips as she slipped off the chair towards them.

“The birthday girl is still asleep,” Lisa said in hushed tones, giving a big smile. “Nice to finally meet you, Billy. Took you long enough.”

Before he could answer, he was wrapped in a hug. Maybe it was just Chrissy’s family, but the amount of physical affection they were willing to give to someone who was nearly a stranger astounded him. Billy gave her a hug back.

“Her room’s second door on the right, Billy,” James said in a low voice.

“Thanks,” he answered, fluffing up his hair before making his way down the hall.

Her door was already opened a crack. Inside was a room decorated in lovely yellows and pale blues, an elevated version of her childhood bedroom that had a soft spot in his heart. Her same clear phone sat on her night stand, surrounded by clutter. A stack of shoe boxes leaned against her dresser, discarded clothes hanging out of her hamper.

And in the middle of it all was Chrissy. Fast asleep in her bed, tangled in her blanket as her hair frizzed out. It was as if his soul lifted out of his body for a moment, seeing her this way again after her absence.

Quietly he made his way to the side of her bed that had more space, curling up against her. Chrissy stirred, murmuring in her sleep. Billy smiled softly, pressing a kiss to her exposed shoulder before wrapping his arm around her. She shifted closer, an unconscious reaction to his proximity.

He lay with her, taking in the moments as they passed on by. Watched as she started to wake, sleep seemingly melding her reality of Florida with whatever dream she had thought she was having that he was in. Billy could barely hold back a grin as she started to realize that those things were one and the same. Chrissy's eyes widened, disbelief turning to joy.

"Morning," he said, nonchalant.

"Billy, how—?" she asked, voice raspy with sleep. "You said you— *You lied to me.* "

Billy let out a quiet laugh. "It was for a good cause."

"I'd say," she murmured, shifting to face him. "How'd you get here?"

"Flew just for you. Your dad picked me up at the airport."

Chrissy narrowed her eyes. "So he was in on it too? My birthday trip isn't happening, huh?"

"I think this is a *little* better." Billy kissed her, smoothing back some of her frizzy hair.

"Best birthday surprise I've ever gotten."

He snuck his fingers under her blanket, diving past the elastic of her underwear. Chrissy's breath hitched, a small noise managing to make its way from her lips before she clapped a hand over her mouth. She grew wet against his fingers, her breath against his chest only goading him on.

"Were you dreaming of me, pretty girl?" Bill asked, watching her reaction. He teased fingers on the sides of her bud, touch so gentle it seemed to drive her mad.

"I thought I was," she breathed, her grip wrapping around his wrist as he continued to play with her clit. "I could still be dreaming."

"That'd be a cruel dream." Fingers meandered further down, a rumble coming from his chest from how slick she was now.

Chrissy wiggled her underwear down past her knees, pulling him closer as he began to tease at her entrance. God, he wanted to fuck her. But the door was open and a whole new set of parents were not far enough away to risk making a bad impression. But he had also been gone for a while. Perhaps they just expected it.

Fuck, he thought. *Maybe I should've gotten a motel room.*

Chrissy didn't seem to notice or care about his confliction, taking it into her own hands to undo his zipper and free his erection from its uncomfortable prison. She kissed him, passionate and needy. Teeth bit at her lower lip, sweet sighs filling the quiet as their hands worked at each others' bodies.

"Quiet," she whispered, flipping over to press her bottom against his cock. "Just like at my mom's house. It'll be okay."

That was the only assurance he needed, it seemed. Desire overrode reason; he slipped his pants down, entering her with a stifled groan. Chrissy managed to dig in her nightstand for a condom — *he wondered how long they had sat there, waiting for someone* — and within seconds, he was back inside. Connecting with her was akin to becoming whole. Chrissy's quiet moans muffled themselves in her pillow, fingers gripping his hand that had settled on her hip. They tested how fast he could thrust without the bed squeaking; apparently hard enough to coax an orgasm from Chrissy. His vision turned white as his own end came not long after, breath heavy in his chest as his body settled against hers again.

It took everything to finally leave her bed. Sleep wasn't an option for him; he was too wired by all the newness of his surroundings, being in Chrissy's world. Thankfully they lived in the same time zone, so that wouldn't mess him up. Today would be filled with coffee. Maybe a nap. Billy liked the idea of a nap.

As they filtered out of Chrissy's room, the sound of The Stooges blasted from the kitchen. Lisa was nowhere to be seen, mostly likely already having left for work. James was in the kitchen washing dishes, a fat orange cat sitting at his feet.

"Look who finally leaves her bedchamber," James called out, turning

down the music slightly. "Morning, birthday girl."

Chrissy made a beeline to her father, giving him a hug and a kiss. "Morning, Daddy."

Billy realized he had never heard Chrissy use that word before. Back in Hawkins, Wes was just Wes. It was endearing.

"How'd you like your birthday gift?" her dad asked. "Flew it out here 'specially for you."

"Love it," she grinned.

"You guys hungry? Second pot of coffee's on its way."

"Starving," Billy said. It was the truth. He hadn't had anything to eat since hours before his flight, too full of nerves to be hungry.

"Good," James said. "Teenie, how do you feel about pancakes? Or you want something fancier?"

"Pancakes, please," Chrissy said, leaning against the counter. "Last time you tried something 'fancy' for breakfast, you wasted a whole carton of eggs."

Kathleen and Nick almost felt like old friends the moment he had met them. Perhaps because he had heard so much about them over the years. Kathleen was willowy, sharp eyebrows and a mess of electric blue hair. Nick was slightly more subdued, a short black mohawk and dark clothes complimenting warm brown skin. They still weren't the type of people he imagined Chrissy making friends with, but with him as her boyfriend, Billy guessed anything was possible.

"He's prettier in person," Kathleen said. "No wonder you spend your free flights going back to the middle of nowhere."

"Chris' birthday bash is happening at our place," Nick added. "You

like to party?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” Billy grinned.

Nick laughed. “Oh man,” he said to Chrissy. “I like this one.”

“Good,” Chrissy grinned. “Because he’s here to stay. Better get used to him.”

Nick and Kathleen’s place was quaint from the outside. A smaller home, surrounded by a mix of pines and short palms with a smattering of patchy grass. Completely unlike he would’ve imagined a place of theirs to look like. Once inside, though, their personalities exploded onto the walls. Posters tacked floor to ceiling, a half painted mural of Joey Ramone on one of the walls. Furniture had been pushed aside to create more space for the eventual guests.

“Reminds me of a club I used to go to,” Billy commented, arm slung around Chrissy’s shoulder.

“Is that good or bad?” Kathleen teased.

“It’s way good.” Billy shot a grin. “Just means you aren’t a bunch of fuckin’ posers.”

Kathleen laughed. “Nick would be jazzed to hear that. Tell him once he gets back from the liquor store.”

“Who else is coming?” Chrissy asked, slipping off her jacket. Billy had watched her meticulously pick out an outfit for tonight after he had thrown on a pair of beat up jeans and muscle tank. She had chosen to go bright, a strappy neon purple shirt paired with her weird stirrup pants he always poked fun at. He wondered if she had done so to make sure she remained the center of the celebration.

“Meg, for sure,” Kathleen said. “Ollie. Jesse and Ellie. Oh! Briggs and his new girlfriend. Nick invited a bunch more, so we’ll see who all shows.”

As people started to filter in, Billy realized he hadn’t expected such a

huge turnout. It *was* Chrissy, after all. She knew everybody back in Hawkins, and to expect different for Tallahassee was an error on his behalf. What impressed him more was how diverse the crowd was. Girls from the airline, done up pretty and en vogue, a smattering of what he assumed were friends of Nick and Kathleen's, a handful of people older than them he assumed she had met through the salon or bars.

He and Chrissy were already a few shots in when she began her disappearing act. Billy couldn't fault her this time; it was her damn birthday, and she was expected to make the rounds. Expected to talk to everyone and their mother. That left Billy alone with Nick and some other guy who had wandered up.

It was almost overwhelming. It *bothered* him; parties were where he had always thrived. But this new type of crowd was not something he felt prepared for. He was used to high school parties, to college keggers when he visited Tommy. This felt more mature in a way. Far beyond who he was even now.

"Hey, Cali boy," Nick called out, holding up a couple of shots in his hands. "Can you handle Fireball?"

Billy's face split into a grin. Now *this* was his type of party. "You think I'm some kind of pussy or somethin'? Hand it over."

More booze, and he felt his discomfort fade into a familiar blurred out existence. He, Nick, and the other guy — *apparently the aforementioned Briggs* — had gotten into a heated debate over who had the better music scene, California or New York, by the time Chrissy meandered back around.

"Looks like you made friends," she said, rosy and slightly disheveled. "Hey Briggs. Your new girl is a klepto. Keep an eye on her or Kathy's gonna lose it."

"Fuck," Briggs muttered as Nick exploded into peals of laughter. "Not again. Be right back."

Chrissy snuggled up to Billy gazing up at him with glassy eyes. He pulled her in for a kiss, a realization dawning on him.

“Hey birthday girl,” Billy said devilishly. “You know you never got your birthday spanking on your *actual* birthday.”

“Do *not* touch me,” Chrissy warned, stumbling a bit as she pushed away from him.

He let out a laugh, bringing her to a chair as she half-heartedly fought him, whining the entire time. Billy managed to wrestle her over his knee, the fight fully draining from her as she realized how drunk she actually was. The party had gathered around, giving cheers and hollers.

“Twenty-two and one to grow on, baby!” one of her friends yelled.

Billy pointed at the girl who had yelled, hand feeling like it flew out in front of him faster than he had wanted.

“Exactly,” he slurred. “Promise I’ll be gentle.”

“Billy, I swear to god—”

SMACK. His hand connected with her ass, a decently loud clap mixing with the rock that was blaring over the stereo. Chrissy let out a shriek, laughter punctuating her every breath.

“You said you were gonna be gentle!” she howled, smacking at his leg.

“I lied,” Billy said simply. “Hey! Give me a countdown.”

A chorus of voices chanted out number by number as Chrissy hung her head, crying with laughter. It was infectious; Billy couldn’t help but start to giggle as she tensed under his hand —

“**TEN!**”

— loose waves bouncing as she shook with every laugh. God, she was cute. And such a good sport. Billy knew it would’ve never happened sober; he had to relish this nonsense while it happened.

A camera flashed somewhere as he gave a few more smacks, almost missing her bottom with the last one as he shook with laughter—

“FIVE!”

— all the while thinking of how fucking lucky he was. That all the years of heartbreak and longing were worth these silly moments.

“THREE! TWO! ONE!”

The guests all started to cheer, a few singing ‘Happy Birthday’ off key as Chrissy collected herself. She finally sat up, pressing into Billy’s arm as she leaned a little too far back.

“That *hurt*, ” she managed to say, now calm enough to get words out.

“I’ll kiss it better later,” he grinned.

“Yeah, if you’re not passed out first.”

“I said later, it wasn’t a *specific* later.”

In hindsight, trying to sit on the steps of Kathleen and Nick’s place was not the best idea while it was dark and she was drunk. There was a moment Chrissy felt herself sway to hard to the left, almost crashing into the pillar and slipping off the first step.

God, she thought. *I almost ate shit and died on my birthday.*

Billy had saved her, pulling her to his chest and planting a kiss on her forehead. He was just as trashed at this point, but had managed to hold on to his equilibrium. She envied him.

Being outside, feeling the cool air against her skin, brought her to a slightly clearer mindset. She had wanted to get away for a bit, spend some time alone with her dashing California boy before the other guests swallowed her up again. It wasn’t that she wasn’t enjoying herself, far from. There was a need to be close to Billy, uninterrupted. To cherish this time with him.

It was a sweet silence. No words necessary between them, just a familiar closeness as their shoulders touched and smoke filled the air. Billy broke the silence as he leaned back on his hand.

“I’m gonna marry you.”

“Bullshit,” she said, a lazy smile on her face.

“No,” Billy said, his face as serious as it could be. “I mean it.”

“You’re drunk, babe.”

“Drunk-shmunk. Doesn’t mean it’s not true.” Billy took a drag, letting smoke filter from his mouth and nose. Even drunk, he was the most beautiful person, mussed up and starry eyed.

“You didn’t even ask if I wanna marry you,” Chrissy giggled, pushing up the strap of her shirt. A bit of her cherry fell on her leg, a hiss emanating from her lips. “Shit!”

Billy gave a chuckle, leaning forward. A hand swept away the ash, lips pressing to her thigh. Chrissy watched, lip toying between her teeth.

“Marry me,” he said, “and I’ll kiss your scrapes and burns and whatever the hell else you want. Forever.”

“Even when you don’t want to?” she asked, cocking her head to get a better look at that beautiful drunken face.

“Not possible, but sure.” With a grunt, he flipped over, laying on the concrete as his head rested on her thigh. “So, you gonna marry me or not, pretty girl?”

Chrissy couldn’t suppress the grin on her face, flicking off ash from her cigarette as her other hand swept through sandy curls.

“Yeah. I’ll marry you,” Chrissy beamed.

Billy closed his eyes, taking another drag of his cigarette. “Cool.”

“Don’t think I can wear white, though.”

“Why?”

Chrissy clicked her tongue. “I’m like the antithesis of a virgin, Billy.”

“Big word coming from you,” he chuckled. “And whatever. We’ll find you a big, yellow princess dress. Big like the one that girl wore in Labyrinth.”

“I want one like Heather Locklear’s.”

Billy let out a sigh. “You are so predictable, y’know that? Everything’s gotta be on display.”

“Not like you ever complain,” she retorted.

“True. You wear whatever the hell you want.” A hand pressed against her face, warm and calloused. “Jesus, you’re pretty.”

“And you’re drunk,” Chrissy giggled, taking his hand in hers. She left a small kiss on his palm.

“I’ll be hungover tomorrow, though,” Billy mused. “You’re still gonna be pretty.”

“Are you even gonna remember this tomorrow?”

Billy shrugged. “Are you?”

“Hell if I know,” she mumbled, putting out the last of her cigarette on the concrete.

“Too bad we’re not in Vegas.” Billy let out a snicker. “Then we wouldn’t be able to forget about this tomorrow.”

“You’d be okay being married by Elvis?” An eyebrow quirked upwards as she started to giggle again. “God, your standards are low.”

“Who fuckin’ cares? A wedding’s a wedding, sunshine.”

“You’re such a guy.”

“But I’m *your* guy,” he said, his voice growing tired. “Who needs

another beer. Y'think there's any left?"

Chrissy watched as he rolled off her, grunting as he staggered to his feet. The hair on the back of his head frizzed outward, scrunched in impossible ways. Chrissy thought how rarely she had seen this version of drunk Billy, sentimental and full of ideas. More often his combative side came out, aimed towards any man who dared challenge him.

"There has to be. If not, this party blows," she answered, letting him help her up. They both staggered together, laughter filling the quiet of the neighborhood.

"Hey," Billy said as they walked back into the house, "why the fuck does 'fiance' have two spellings when it's pronounce the exact same? That seems fucking stupid."

"It's French." Chrissy gave him a kiss, scoping out the kitchen. "Why, you gonna start calling me your fiancée?"

"Not if I can't remember which one is which," he answered.

In the end, it didn't matter.

The morning came, the aftermath of the celebration evident in bodies strewn across furniture and the floor. For Chrissy, everything was fuzzy after Kathleen's stirring rendition of 'Rebel Yell'. She remembered going outside with Billy. Something about a Vegas wedding. The heat of his body against hers as he lay his head in her lap. A residual giddiness from whatever they had droned on about.

All that did matter was she felt content for the first time since California. Whole. After years of birthdays without him, Chrissy had finally been able to spend such an important day with him.

She decided she'd ask him later if he remembered what they had talked about, once the hangovers ceased.

22. 1989

The summer of 1989 had not been kind to Chrissy.

It had started with an intense block of flights, so many that she hadn't seen Billy in well over two months. By the time August had rolled around, her body had been run so ragged she had gotten a kidney infection.

Billy had taken her extended leave as an opportunity to finally see her. Took care of her while her dad and Lisa were busy, coddled her as she moped around. Kissed her and filled her when neither of them could bear it any longer. It was a relief that he still wanted her, even while she was sick as a dog.

She desperately wanted him to stay. Thought about begging for him to not fly back home. It felt like more and more, the desire to have him stay when he made rare trips to Florida popped up. But they parted, as they had continued to do the past year. Life went back to normal. Flights, phone calls. One night trysts in a hotel room in Indianapolis.

October came. More flights, more phone calls. But with October, illness came again. It had Chrissy frazzled, wanting to vomit every time they got back on the ground. She still had vacation time, but she had hoped to use it for an extended stay by Billy. With the holiday months, she had to take whatever she could, soak him up as much as possible before the drought came.

It was a quiet morning on her day off. Waking had become harder, and without an alarm set, Chrissy had slept well until late morning. As she shuffled, to the bathroom, her stomach lurched again, stopping her in her tracks as she tried to gain composure.

Cold ran down her spine as a small realization dawned on her. An impossibility. But one she had to make sure was just that.

Chrissy was grateful for the advances of technology. Even a few years ago, a home pregnancy test had resembled a chemistry set; she had the unfortunate honor of taking one, holed up in her parent's bathroom at the tender age of sixteen when her body had not quite adjusted to her birth control. She had gotten a beautiful negative, and hoped this little stick would bear the same thing.

Instead, there were two thin blue lines.

Deep blue. There was no dispute whether or not the second line had shown up. Chrissy thought the blue was terribly uncalled for. It was supposed to be a soothing color, but there was nothing comforting about this at all.

Fire engine red. She pushed her hair from her face, staring at the plastic stick again. *That's what color it should be. A fucking alarm.*

For the first time in several days, she didn't feel like throwing up. Just eerily calm, fingers gripping the box before shoving it deep into the trash. Serene as she wrapped the stick in toilet paper, pressing it into a fist as she made her way back to her room.

The calmness seemed to seep away as she lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Dread, deep and terrible as the sea, swallowed her as another realization hit her. Billy was almost a thousand miles away. Blissful and unaware. Unaffected until she involved him.

Chrissy couldn't help but envy him.

"You know, for someone who was such a sneaky teenager, you suck at hiding things."

Chrissy turned to look at her door. Lisa stood there, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed. She didn't look upset, nor amused; more like she was trying to gauge Chrissy's reaction.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Chrissy answered, flipping the page of her Vogue.

"Christina." The door clicked shut as Lisa walked in, perching at the edge of Chrissy's bed. "I found the box in the trash."

"Oh." Chrissy stared blankly at her comforter. "I was just... checking."

"And?" Lisa coaxed. "Look, I've been there. A girl doesn't toss the box and not the test if it isn't negative."

There was a heavy pause. It felt like a stone had lodged itself in her throat at the breastbone. She was caught; there was no way to ignore or deflect anymore. The bed squeaked as she sat up, not once looking Lisa in the eye.

"What did you end up doing?" Chrissy asked softly.

"I went to the doctor, first of all. Which is where you and I are going first thing tomorrow." A tan hand settled on Chrissy's knee.

"Yeah," Chrissy said, resigned. "Doctor. Tomorrow."

Lisa had driven her to the doctor's office, as promised. Chrissy wasn't sure how much of it was to be supportive and how much was to make sure she *actually* went. Either way, she was grateful for the company in the waiting room. Even more so, she was grateful for the ride home.

"I can't believe..." she trailed off. A frustrated noise left her. "Stupid fucking medicine. Stupid kidney infection."

"I have heard that strong antibiotics can affect birth control," Lisa said casually, eyes on the road. "Never seen it actually happen. Not the luckiest year, huh?"

“No,” Chrissy replied, irritable. “Not at all.”

“Did she say how far along you are?”

“Somewhere around eight or nine weeks.” The words didn’t feel right coming from her.

Lisa was quiet for a few minutes. “I suppose that’s about right. That’s when Billy came to visit.”

Chrissy let out another frustrated groan, burying her face in her palms.

“Your dad would find it funny,” Lisa continued. “His grandbaby was made in his house. He always calls the house a creator’s paradise.”

“ *Please* don’t tell him.”

“I won’t.” There was another small pause. “What you decide to do is your private choice, sweetheart. Like I said, I’ve been here before. It’s not easy.”

Chrissy watched as the familiarity of their neighborhood came into sight. The park, then the gas station she always stopped at.

“What did you do?” she asked again, looking at Lisa.

She imagined it had all happened long before her dad came into the picture. Before the brick red hair; maybe even before Indiana. Lisa’s admission of something so personal almost made her want to cry.

“Wasn’t the right time or the right guy. I terminated,” Lisa said. Her voice was unwavering. “And it ended up, I’m not a fan of kids anyway. And I wouldn’t have ended up with your dad.”

“I was around.”

“You’re different.” Lisa gave her a smile. “You were already a little adult by the time I came into the picture.”

“True.” Chrissy let out a breath she had forgotten she was holding in. “Lisa?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

Lisa only smiled as they turned onto their street.

Another week came and went. With it, the realization that her stomach was in a permanent state of bloating. She didn't look pregnant — *god, she hated how uneasy the word made her* — but paranoia had wormed into her brain, her clothing choices now the plethora of loose shirts and dresses she owned when not in her airline uniform.

There was no more time to ruminate. A quick call to Billy, and Chrissy had booked a flight to Indiana.

The song and dance of the airport was accompanied by nausea. Anxiety. Chrissy had never hated flying before; now everything in her wanted nothing but to be anchored to the earth.

Her nerves seemed to heighten and melt all at once when she saw Billy's face. Those baby blue eyes lighting up at the sight of her, an unusually clean shaven face showing off the cut of his jaw. He looked so much younger. A reminder that she, too, was not as old as trauma and life experience would have her believe.

We're just kids. The realization sent a shiver down her spine. *Just kids who don't know what the hell we're doing. What we're gonna do.*

“Chris!” Billy called out, jogging up to meet her. Chrissy sank into his arms, breathing in his cologne and the scent of hairspray. Home.

“I missed you.” Her words were muffled in his shirt, a soft flannel that bore his resistance to the heavy coats needed in the tail end of fall.

“Missed you too,” he said, voice soft. “You all right?”

“Mhm,” she lied. “Just gotta go to the bathroom before we go. You couldn’t pay me to piss in that airplane.”

She hurried away, locking herself in a stall. Not long after, the few contents of her stomach splashed into a pristine toilet bowl, the sound of her retching echoing too loud for comfort. The loudness of the toilet flushing came not long after. The sound of water splashing from the sink, on her hands and then gargled in her mouth. A routine she had gotten used to without understanding the reason.

At the end of it all, Billy stood there. Patient, eager. Blissfully unaware of what was happening inside her. Every bit of Chrissy was bursting to tell him, but she couldn’t help but feel like anything less than announcing this predicament in the safety of his home would cheapen the monumentality.

“Billy?”

His name felt safe in his little flat. The walls dampened the harshness, woven rug under the couch swallowing any echo. His flat had melded with him, become part of his adult identity. Chrissy couldn’t think of him anymore without thinking of his home. She wondered if he felt the same about her. If, soon, it would change and she would be swallowed into his flat too.

“What, babe?”

“Fuck me.” Her voice was sanguine, inviting. Hiding desperation that she held in her core, longing for a bit of normalcy before the weight of decisions and responsibilities exploded on both of them.

“Don’t have to ask me twice,” he smiled, pushing closer.

The weight of his body against hers was, for the first time in a long time, no comfort. No balm for her worries. It ate through Chrissy like acid, burned her insides until a sob bubbled up in the heat.

Hands covered her face as tears continued to spill. Billy pulled away, running a hand through dark waves to soothe her. The passage of time had grown that blunt bob back down to her shoulders. Another sob left her, the realization that her hair had been this long when they first met overwhelming her. It all felt so cyclical and purposeful even in the face of chaos.

"Why are you crying?" He asked, face puzzled. "You wanted me to fuck you, now you're crying. Are you okay?"

"No," she said. Her words were half laughed. "I'm pregnant."

23. the shape of love to come

Those blue, blue eyes snapped to attention, trying to find the words in the quiet after her confession.

"You're sure?" Billy asked.

"If I'm not, I wasted \$50 on a pregnancy test and a doctor's appointment," she said, pushing back hair to no avail. "Lisa went with me to the doctor. I'm 10 weeks along as of yesterday."

"Shit," he breathed, sinking onto the rug beside the couch. "Shit. I didn't... *how?* "

"The antibiotic I was on interacted with my birth control." She surprised herself with how nonchalant she sounded. "Shitty luck, huh?"

He didn't answer her question, instead asking his own. "Do you... want to keep it?"

Chrissy hesitated, trying to search his face for anything besides panic. "Do you?"

"I asked you first," he sighed, rubbing his eyes with his palms.

Something inside her snapped again, fresh tears welling up and tumbling down her face.

"I don't know, Billy," she admitted, palm rubbing at her eye. A clump of mascara came with it. "You're not helping right now."

"I don't know either," he said defensively. "I'm sorry, it's just... it's a *lot* to take in. Look, whatever you want to do, I'll go with it."

"I hate the way you said that," Chrissy sniffled. "You're acting like it's all my decision."

"It mostly is," he countered. With a sigh, Billy pulled her close,

stroking her hair softly. "How long are you here for?"

"Week and a half," she said quietly.

"Let's... let's give ourselves a couple days. Think it over," he suggested, kissing her head. The affection lifted her to a better place. He was trying so hard to calm her; what more could she want in this moment?

"I love you," Chrissy whispered.

"Love you too, sunshine."

Billy decided late afternoon the next day what he ultimately wanted.

Chrissy had been quiet the entire night, only really talking when he asked her questions, or to make a comment on what tv movie they were watching.

He felt so wholly conscious of his hand on her side, where his fingers lay on the small swell of her abdomen. How he touched her that night as they lay in bed, felt her breathe into his chest. It wasn't just her now, there was her and the potential of a new person.

It scared him shitless.

He thought about how far he had come in the past few years. How he cared for himself, cared for a cat, felt semi-successful in his relationships and job. He felt as close to stable as he thought he'd ever get.

But deep down, there was Neil. Therapy and time had helped to shrink him smaller and smaller, but he would never fully go away. Would he take the risk of his father rearing his ugly head inside Billy, just for the chance to do right by a new human? For the opportunity to give love he had never fully felt?

Yes.

A hundred times yes.

Rain had started to pour in sheets outside, chilling the October air further. Chrissy had snuggled under a blanket, draping herself over Billy. It was comforting. Despite the tension, she needed him to be close. Still wanted him even though he had said so many wrong things yesterday.

"So," she said, leaning her head against him, eyes closed. "Any thoughts so far?"

"Yeah, actually."

She looked up. "Really."

"Mhm," Billy murmured, kissing her cheek. "I'm leaning towards 'keep it'."

"Seriously?" Chrissy asked, hazel eyes wide.

"How 'bout you? Any big moments of clarity?"

"I think I want to keep it too." Chrissy looked down, giving a shy smile. There was something about the look on her face that made him beam.

"Guess we gotta tell our parents I knocked you up."

Chrissy's face scrunched into a frown. "That's such a gross way to put it."

"Put a baby in you?" He tried again, giving a wicked grin.

"If you say that to anyone, I'm leaving."

Billy let out a laugh, giving her a deep kiss. She seemed to relax into him again, the stress of yesterday's conversation gone for the moment. That's all he really wanted, for her to be happy and feel safe

with him.

"You're gonna stay, right?" he asked. "It'd be kind of fucked up if you went back to Florida."

"I have to pack up my stuff," she protested. "And I have work. I have to tell work I'm pregnant in the *first* place."

"I'll take off and come down to help," Billy shrugged. "Pretty girl like you shouldn't have to do it all by yourself."

Chrissy's face broke out in a grin.

"Greatly appreciated, handsome," came her answer, a kiss planting on his cheek. She drew away, eyes searching for something in his face.

"What?" Billy asked, trying to keep his voice as even as possible.

"This isn't... This isn't permanent, right?" Chrissy asked, hesitant. "Being in Hawkins."

"Definitely not," he said confidently. "We stay here until the kid gets here, and then we go from there."

"I have money saved." Fingernails traced his jaw as hazel eyes flitted from his eyes to the comforter. "It's a lot, Billy. That's all I've been doing the past four years. Saving money so I could live where I wanted."

"Like Chicago?"

"Yeah," she grinned. "Like Chicago."

"I told you," she insisted. "You can see it rounding out more on the bottom."

"You're just bloated, Chris," he replied, running a hand through his loose curls.

"From *what*? The slice of toast I managed to not barf up?"

"Fuck if I know." He scooted forward on the couch, pulling her hips towards him. A small kiss was planted on her stomach, forcing a blush onto her face. "It's cute how excited you are, though."

"Better than freaking out about it," Chrissy shrugged, a smile playing at her lips. "Are you excited?"

"... Yes?" Billy hesitated, rubbing a thumb against the exposed skin of her hip. "I mean, I think I'll be more excited when you stop barfing all over my apartment."

"I *said* I was sorry about the kitchen sink."

"I'm joking, jeez." He let go of her hips, leaning back into the cushion. "It just doesn't feel real yet, y'know?"

Chrissy pulled down her shirt, flopping down next to him. "Yeah, I guess I get it. I'm gonna see if we can do an ultrasound. The visual will probably help."

"You know what's funny?" Billy gave a half-cocked smile, pulling her close. "That night we got in that huge fight over prom, my dad thought I got you pregnant and that we were running away to California."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Now I gotta see if he'll ream me out for actually knockin' you up."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Chrissy groaned, covering her face. "I'm excited to tell Susan and Max, but your dad... that's another story."

"Well," Billy sighed, "just be prepared for some lecture about responsibility and traditional values. But who cares what he thinks? It's not his kid."

"Thank god," she muttered.

Billy let his hand fall on her stomach.

"I can't believe you're this far along," he murmured. "So last time you were here, you were already pregnant?"

"Mhm. I didn't know it. Didn't feel like I was." Chrissy cupped her hand over his.

He let his hands travel up under the shirt she had taken from him, giving a light squeeze to one of her breasts. Chrissy squirmed, letting out a whine.

"They're so *sensitive*, " she whimpered. "Be gentle."

Billy felt a grin pull his lips wide as his finger swiped softly against an already hard nipple. "They're incredible."

"Pervert," she breathed.

"That's not gonna change," he chuckled.

"It better not." Chrissy leaned in, giving him a deep kiss that stirred up fire in his core. "I think I'd die if you stopped touching me like this."

"Lucky for you, I won't," Billy grinned.

"Even when I get huge?" she asked. It was so genuine he couldn't help but let out a giggle. "Even when you have to help me off the sofa?"

"I'll make it work." Teeth bit over his lip as he took another swipe at her breast. "Never fucked a pregnant girl before. It'll be interesting."

Her mom knew something was up immediately. Like a bloodhound, she could smell the nerves on Chrissy. It only served to make her

more nervous; the big reveal felt like a burden she couldn't wait to shrug off her shoulders.

It felt wrong, how normal the entirety of this visit was. Her and Billy sitting, hands clasped in one another's, on the floral couch in the living room. Patty flitting around offering food and drinks while Wes drank a beer in his recliner, asking about the flight to Indiana, how the auto shop was.

The moment the word *'pregnant'* left her lips, the whole room seemed to change. The ease and nervousness simultaneously disappeared, replaced with unbridled excitement.

"You're seriously?" Patty asked, eyes huge. "Chrissy, you're absolutely certain?"

"Don't think a doctor would lie about that," she answered, shifting.

"So, you're telling us we're going to be grandparents?" Wes asked. Sweat dripped off the can, forming a ring on the recliner's fabric.

"Yeah," Billy said, an undeniable pride in his voice. "Grandma and Grandpa DiMartino."

Patty couldn't keep it together any longer. Chrissy watched as tears welled up in her eyes, hands flying to her face before she rushed to her daughter's side.

"Oh, honey," she said quietly. "A baby. A grandbaby!"

"Uh huh," Chrissy murmured, wrapping her arms around her mother. There was no hesitation in the return embrace, tight and protective. "I'm due in June."

"My goodness," she laughed through sniffles, "that's so soon. And you're moving back?"

The question was so hopeful that Chrissy's heart broke.

"Yeah." Her answer was empty of excitement. "I'll be moving in with Billy soon."

"I'll be helping her move," Billy interjected. "Gotta make sure my girl has all her stuff, y'know?"

"Of course," Wes said. There was a pause before he stood, putting his hand out to Billy. "Congratulations, son. We're all here for both of you."

We're all here for you.

Billy had never felt so involved in something before. Not in sports, not in his own wellbeing, not in his own family. But now, there was a whole new family that was *his*. The family that spread out into Chrissy's, sprawling in love and acceptance.

So when they pulled up to the Hargrove home, he was understandably tense. Hol ding on to Wes' words of acceptance, knowing they would not be found here easily.

"You okay?" Chrissy asked from the passenger seat.

He turned to look at her. Hair fluffed out, a pretty dress that hid their announcement well.

He wished the energy was the same as at the DiMartino's house. Instead, that tension that always lived in the Hargrove house swallowed him. Pleasantries came and went. Max and Chrissy talked about where she had been flying, spoke of new movies and music. Susan and her sweet smile sat, watching as her family was together once more. And Neil... Neil sat. Watched. Said few words, only taking in everything with suspicion.

"We actually came by because we have something to tell you," Billy finally said, nerves ramping up again.

"Oh?" Susan said, eyebrows raised. "Good news?"

"I'm pregnant," Chrissy blurted out, a smile taking over her features. "So, pretty good news, I think?"

Max immediately jumped up, ginger hair swinging as she collided first with Billy, then Chrissy. Susan followed behind, giving congratulations and hugs as she started to cry.

"A grandbaby," she sniffled. "Oh, Chrissy, I'm so happy for you! And Billy! You're going to be a *father*, I can't believe it!"

"I knew it," Max added. "I knew it was something big. I thought you guys were gonna tell us Billy proposed or something, but this is even *better*."

Neil had just sat there amid the squeals and tears. A stone; unmoving, no emotion. Billy thought one could replace him with a statue and feel the same amount of presence. Part of him didn't care that there was no reaction. Perhaps it was better. But another part desperately wanted *anything* from him. Congratulations. Anger. Excitement. Disappointment. Something to show he cared about what was going on.

"Neil, you've been quiet," Susan finally said, testing the waters. Voice overly hopeful. "Isn't this exciting? You're going to be a grandpa!"

"What's your plan?" A simple question. Billy felt a smidge of relief.

"She's moving back," he answered, draping an arm over Chrissy's shoulders. "We have a lot to figure out, but—"

"I meant about marriage," Neil interrupted. Blue eyes, near mirrors of his own, stared with icy precision.

"W-We thought about having a wedding after," Chrissy answered, voice small. "I think it'd be sweet, having our baby there celebrating —"

"I'm talking about legalities, Christina," Neil said, the icy gaze redirecting towards her. "You're not really going to bring a child into this world out of wedlock, are you? There's very little the law can do for you if my son decides to go down his mother's path."

Fuck. Of course he would bring up his mother. Billy felt himself bristle, fingers gripping Chrissy's arm. She took his hand in her own, squeezing it. As if to say, *it's fine; he can't scare me.*

"I appreciate the concern," she said, voice measured. He'd heard that voice before when she dealt with difficult flyers. "But Billy and I can figure this out by ourselves. He's much more responsible than you give him credit for."

Neil certainly was not expecting the push back from her. Eyebrows raised as his arms folded in front of him. The eerie calm in his face only served to heighten Billy's anxiety.

"We just wanted you to know." Billy was grateful for the strength in his voice in this moment. "Not asking a thing from you, dad. Just thought you'd like to know."

"When's the baby coming?" Max asked, trying to break the uncomfortable air with her excitement. "Not for a while, right? We can still do stuff together before you get into full 'mom' mode, right?"

"June," Chrissy said, flashing a smile. "And of course. I'm going to be on leave, so I'll need *somebody* to keep me entertained."

"June," Susan breathed. "How wonderful. You'll have the summer to enjoy a baby."

As she continued to blabber on with Chrissy about the baby, Neil quietly stood and took leave to the backyard. No one seemed surprised; Susan barely gave him a glance. Max gave Billy a look, unsure of what to do.

Billy slipped away, giving Chrissy a kiss. Perhaps for luck. He'd need it in a second.

The October night was chilly, daylight far gone. Street lamps were the only illumination besides the gentle glow of iridescent lights from windows. In it, he saw Neil, leaned against his truck. There wasn't a beer in his hand like he usually did when he stood outside by himself. Caution swept over Billy; it either meant this could go better than normal, or far, far worse.

"Dad," Billy said, treading down the cement steps to the truck. "Can we talk? Please?"

"About what?" came Neil's disinterested answer.

"Don't do this," he said, exasperated. "Look, I'm giving you a chance here."

"To what? Watch you make a mistake?" he asked. "Billy, you've made enough of those. Don't rope that girl into another one."

Anger bubbled up inside him.

"You know, we could've just moved to California. Could've just taken away your chance to meet your grandkid. You made my life *hell*, and here I am, holding out an olive branch and you won't fuckin' take it," Billy spat. "The baby's not the mistake, trying to play nice with *you* is."

There was a silence. Cold air pushed from Neil's nose in near-opaque clouds, eyes staring dead ahead.

"When your mother left, I did my best," he said, voice earnest. "And you just didn't learn. Didn't try at all to be a good kid. I thought after... the hospital you had finally learned, but you let that girl back in your life and now look. Still making impulsive decisions, not thinking a damn thing through."

"I *did* think this through," Billy argued. "Look, you don't have to be there. Okay? You can just stay out of our lives if you want. Don't have to watch me screw up anymore."

Billy turned to go back inside, the cold sinking deeper into his bones. The hurt, the disappointment he had told himself to steel against but had let down his guard enough to let in.

"Billy."

"*What.*"

"You take care of that baby." Neil paused again. "And you take care of Christina."

“Yeah,” he said, feeling his whole body sink into tiredness. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

24. go walk it off

It was a tireless effort, moving Chrissy's things cross country. Having to break the news to James upon their arrival that she was already 12 weeks along, waiting nervously for his reaction. Feeling relief breaking as James asked when he should fly up to see the little squirt. The sting and splintering pain of overworked muscles and nerves.

Billy had never felt so glad to see endless, barren fields before. Nor had he been so loose since California with his Valium. Anything to sleep through those anxiety filled nights, to stave off rippling muscle spasms in his back, an unwanted reminder of the past when the future was crystalline.

He could feel her staring every time he came from the bathroom. Day after day. Week after week. It became an agonizing routine, feeling the fullness of his anxiety throttle in his chest before feeling it melt into nothing, dreamless sleep taking him not long after.

In those moments, Billy knew there was no escape from what he tried to ignore. That this was a problem, one he needed to fix before it took away all he built.

That morning as Billy shaved the grown out stubble on his face, he took a hard look at his reflection. Tired eyes framed by a mess of curls, thin fading scars littering his skin. A smarter of freckles fading in the early winter, taking his last vestiges of true youth with them. A man with too much on his mind and not enough ways to silence the noise.

He had to be better. If not for himself, then for her.

The Hargrove home was unusually cheery. Billy chalked it up to the upcoming festivities, Thanksgiving being one of Susan's favorite holidays. Perhaps it was also his rare appearance. Who the hell knew. All Billy knew was that the reason for his visit would soon damper the seldom seen joy.

"Chrissy likes yams, right?" Susan asked, pressing a pencil to a spiral notebook. Her preparation list for the holiday had grown longer as Billy sat at the table with her.

"Yeah, she's a fan." Billy gave a small smile. "Can't get enough of 'em right now."

"Oh, good," Susan said. "I didn't want to make too much. You know Max hates them, there's always too much left over."

There was always too much left over of *everything*. Susan had a habit of doubling recipes, probably from cooking so damn much for her own family before their relocation to Hawkins. There was no way for four people to make their way through as much as she made. Maybe he'd take some over to Mitch.

"Hey, Susan?"

She looked up over her reading glasses. A new addition to her face, another mark of the passage of time. Billy shifted in his seat, clearing his throat.

"Look, you know I hate asking you for anything," he started, feeling discomfort settle in his stomach as she stared into his eyes. "It's just... I need... Things are bad again."

"Bad like how?" she asked slowly, leaning forward on the table. There was a tightness to her voice.

"I've been... over-using my Valium." *Fuck*. Saying it out loud hurt. "Since I helped Chris move back."

There was a quiet sigh from Susan, her glasses slipping off her nose and clinking to the table. "Oh, *Billy*."

"I can't—" He took a breath in, sharp and cutting in his lungs. "I can't

do this to Chris. To my kid.”

“What about the rest of us?” came a voice from behind. “You think we wanted to see you like that?”

Billy turned his head to see Max, leaning against the archway to the dining room. Arms crossed, a low ponytail curving over her shoulder. Words stuck themselves in his throat. All he could manage was a solemn shake of his head.

“Max, did you know?” Susan asked, the tightness back in her voice. “We talked about this. You’re supposed to tell me if things change.”

“I didn’t,” she replied. “Chrissy didn’t say anything to me either. It’s not like I have time to count pills anymore, Mom. I’ve got school. Exams.”

The conversation unfolding in front of him dizzied Billy. Behind his back, all this time, they had been keeping a close eye on him. A small anger bubbled inside him at the betrayal of privacy, but quickly quelled. Would he have been able to keep afloat all this time without Susan or Max? How much of their meddling had saved him from a worse fate? Shame burned on his face.

“I don’t want to be like this anymore,” Billy finally said. “I need help.”

The stone facade Max had broke at his words. She swore under her breath, looking away as her eyes became glassy.

“We can figure something out,” Susan said gently. “Maybe we should go to your doctor together? Come up with a plan?”

“I can stay over more,” Max offered, a waver in her voice. “Anything we can do to fix this. You’re like a zombie when you’re on that stuff, Billy. It’s scary.”

That trampled his heart like a stampede.

“Yeah,” he said, feeling his voice go hoarse. “Please. I want it all to be better.”

Time seemed to fly by and creep past slowly at the same time. Max had taken a seat next to her mother, the three of them discussing a short-term plan before Billy could find time to see his psychiatrist. The notebook before Susan filled once again with bullet points and suggestions. A cemented vision of his future.

"You'll be okay," Susan comforted.

"Why will he be okay?" came Neil's voice as the back door closed. His face was rosy from the cold, icy gaze zeroing in on Billy. A shiver went down his spine.

"He's just stressed about the baby, Neil," Susan said quickly, flipping back to her Thanksgiving list.

It didn't matter; Neil scooped the notebook from her, flipping to the page of her scrawling handwriting. His face hardened, tossing it back to the table as he removed his coat. The quiet rage filled the room, everyone holding their breath as they waited for him to speak. To act. Anything.

"This crap again?" The question was pointed, needing no answer. There was no room for one as Neil continued. "I'm not surprised in the least. I knew the moment they gave you all those drugs you'd turn into a junkie. Is Christina involved in this too? You get her hooked?"

"Neil!" Susan cried out. "That's not what this is."

"Then what is it? Because it looks like a damn intervention for my junkie son," Neil snapped at her. A rare occurrence. "What was the *one* thing I told you? Take care of that baby and Christina. And you can't even do that right."

"I *am* taking care of them!" Billy shot back, slamming a fist down on the table. Max jumped at the sound, eyes wide. "I wouldn't fucking be here asking Susan for help if I didn't want to take care of them!"

"You'd figure it out yourself if you were a man!" Neil said. "All that money blown on a quack, and what do you become? A weak person who can't figure out his problems on his own. Is that how you're

going to raise your child? To be weak?"

It was enough. Billy stood, the chair scraping across the linoleum. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Max and Susan, fear in both their eyes. Such a blow up had been avoided since he had moved out. It seemed now there was nothing anyone could do to avoid it.

"You piece of shit," he spat. "I hate you! You get that?! I fucking *hate* you."

"You know who you sound like?" Neil shouted back. "Your whore of a mother. Hate me all you want, but I'm *right*. You already screwed up someone's life and they aren't even *here*! "

"Why the hell would I listen to you?!" Billy yelled. "Who the hell would listen to a man who beat his wife and kid?"

Neil was now close enough that his forehead touched Billy's. The scent of alcohol on his breath brought a whole new level of understanding to this terrible conversation. Hands pushed against his shoulders, sending Billy reeling back.

"Neil!" Susan said sharply, fingers gripping the notebook so tightly the paper started to divot.

"No!" Neil bellowed. "No one talks to me like that in my house!"

"What, you're gonna hit me again?" Billy jeered, pushing him back. "Do it, Neil. Deck me in the face like old times. I'll give you a freebie, 'cause I'm gonna throw one right back at'cha."

"Billy," Max pleaded. "Just stop. Please."

"Fuckin' hit me, Neil!" Billy continued, feeling every hair stand up on end. "You wanna see how weak I am? *Hit me.* "

Fingers grabbed the cotton of his shirt, pushing Billy back into the wall with a thud. A wild grin spread across his face as Neil's glowered back at him. Susan and Max both sprung to their feet, begging them to stop. It wasn't enough; Neil's hand readied to connect with Billy's face.

It didn't connect. Billy had grabbed Neil's shirt, tossing him to the floor before he could swing. He hit the ground with a grunt; Billy felt the instinct to kick at him, knock him right in the ribs with his boot. Destroy his father the way he had destroyed Billy over and over. Break his fucking ribs, bruise him in places no one could see but Neil would *feel* with every breath. Find retribution in violence.

"*STOP!*" Susan finally bellowed.

The room seemed to freeze. Susan had never been capable of such noise. There was never a time she had injected herself to the fray so prominently. Whoever this woman was, it was a far cry from the person he had grown up knowing.

"Neil, get up. Apologize to your son, *now*. "

"You saw what he did," Neil argued, pushing himself off the linoleum. "I have nothing to say to that piece of shit."

"Neil," Susan snapped. "You know why he asked me for help? Because he wants to be a good father. So this—" she gestured to the room, "— doesn't happen in his own home. If you'd stop thinking about Dottie for *one* second, you'd realize your son isn't her. He's his own person, and he is a *good* person."

Shit, Billy thought. Susan had never brought up his mom before. At least not when he or Max had been in the room. He glanced to Max, who gave him a tiny shrug, eyes still wide with shock.

"You believe whatever lies you want," Neil finally said, the calm back in his voice. He swept the wrinkles from his shirt, shooting a devastating look at Susan. She seemed to wither for a second before straightening her spine. "William, you aren't welcome here. I suggest you leave before I call the police."

"Neil—"

"Fine," Billy spat. "But if I hear about anything that happens in this house, you touch Susan or Max, you're dead. You leave them out of this."

"There's no reason to worry," Neil said simply, walking to the

basement door. “They aren’t you. They behave.”

Another chill went down Billy’s spine as the door slammed. It always came down to that. If you behaved the way Neil wanted, you were safe. Played his game, acted the perfect wife, daughter, son; you’d avoid his ire. In theory. In practice, it had always been quite different. And now, with Susan’s outburst, he worried playing pretend wouldn’t be enough to help.

“Fuck,” Max said under her breath. “ *Fuck.* ”

“Language,” Susan said, tired.

“Stay by me tonight,” Billy urged, trying to get Susan to look at him. She was busying herself with her glasses and the list once more. “He’s going to have a second wind, Susan. You know how he is.”

“He’ll be fine. I know how to handle it, Billy,” she replied, not looking up from her notebook as she wrote a new list on a fresh page. She ripped it from the notebook with little effort, handing it to Max. “Take Max and go through your medicine cabinet. We need to get you on track as soon as possible.”

“Mom,” Max chimed in, giving her a worried look. “I don’t want you to be alone right now.”

“Maxine,” came the sharp answer. Max straightened a bit. “Go help your brother. This is not negotiable.”

Any argument died in Billy’s throat. All that was left was a terrible sadness and fear. An understanding that Susan had always tread carefully in this lion’s den, smoldering the fires she found herself surrounded in. All he hoped was one day, she’d put them all out and leave. Hopefully soon.

He put a calloused hand on Susan’s willowy shoulder, leaning his head down to touch hers. They stayed like that for a second, Susan’s hand touching his softly. Billy pressed a small kiss to her forehead, straightening out as he glanced at Max. The ginger nodded, slipping into her room to grab her things.

“It’ll be okay,” came Susan’s soft voice. “Really. All of it is going to

be okay, Billy.”

“You call me if something happens,” he answered, voice low.

“I will.” There was a pause. “I’ll come by this weekend to say hi. It’s been a bit since I’ve seen Chrissy. Tell her I miss her.”

“Will do.” Billy caught a glimpse of Max, duffel bag in hand. “You ready?”

“Yup.” Max snuck past him, giving a hug to her mom. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too, pumpkin.” A small, genuine smile bloomed on Susan’s face. “Drive safe.”

Notes for the Chapter:

hey all, this is all i have for now! i'll try to finish up this series but i've got some other stuff i'm working on.

thank you for reading and the support.

25. the missing piece

In the months that followed, Billy noticed two things. One, that he had lost a couple inches of his side of the bed to Chrissy. Two, that Chrissy was quietly struggling.

He knew he'd never understand wholly what ailed her, but as it became harder to hide the swell of her stomach she grew agitated. Paranoid. Convinced somehow that everyone in town looked at her with disdain. All he could do was hold her and soothe the ache of her soul. Repeat in unwavering words his love for her and the child they had yet to meet.

Slowly, confidence grew again. Billy reveled in her laughter and the playful yelling when she took too much time preening in the bathroom. Envied the moments she would feel a kick he could not perceive yet. Marveled over her sometimes in the early mornings as she slept, pushing hair that now reached her shoulders out of her face.

One afternoon, Chrissy had gone out with Annette to run some errands and get up to whatever mischief a pregnant woman and a mother of a four year old could manage. Billy had been left to his own devices, putting together a crib that just wouldn't sit right while shoeing Chevy away. After over an hour of tinkering, he set down his tools and stared at the mess of wood in front of him. Any more of this, and he'd kick the damn thing.

"You win," he said aloud. "Happy? You win. Piece of shit crib."

Billy decided the silence he was met with was too smug. With a groan, he laid back on the rug, staring at the popcorn ceiling.

The new chapter of their life was falling into place. Plans made, furniture and bobbles bought. Everything was just so, except the stupid crib that was *his* job. Almost complete, but something was missing. Maybe a screw or a nut. Maybe something else.

It's just the stupid crib, he thought. A thumb rubbed absentmindedly against the silver pendant around his neck. *I get the crib done, and it'll*

feel complete. Then I'll be ready.

It came to him then, a terrible wish.

A wish that, perhaps, his mother would see her grandchild. That he would find some completeness in her presence, in her comfort that had not been felt since he was a boy.

Terrible, because he knew how little his chance was for it to ever come true. She had essentially dropped off the face of the earth. Didn't even resurface after his close call with death. For all Billy knew, Dottie Hargrove could've been dead and buried long before he had come close to the grave.

Billy wet his lips, blowing out a sigh. Shut his eyes and tried to push the thought from his brain. He had a crib to wrestle with. A new life to look forward to. No time for the bullshit his mind had conjured.

With a grunt his energy was renewed. He stood, surveying the room as he decided where to begin. Tore through the drawers of the dresser Chrissy's parents had given them. Hands sifted through every bit of plastic and cardboard, leaving no stone unturned. Billy had come this far, there was no giving up now.

A glint of metal caught his eye under the stack of blankets in the corner. Squatting down, he lifted the soft cotton to see a bolt laying so unassuming on the ground that it almost angered him again. Perhaps it had rolled away in the mayhem. Hell, it could've been pixies fucking with him for all he knew. The important thing was that he had found it. The missing piece.

Perhaps it was a sign. Search for the other missing piece.

He held the phone in the crook of his neck, pulling out a pad of paper and a pen. Scribbled on it a few times to get the ink flowing as the phone rang. His foot tapped impatiently on the tile, waiting. Hoping.

"Hello?"

A sigh of relief. Not Neil. "Hey Susan, you got a minute?"

"Of course. Everything alright?"

"Yeah, everything's cool." Eyes scrunched closed as he gripped the pen harder. "I, uh, got a favor to ask."

"Okay. Shoot." He could hear a bit of hesitancy in her voice.

"Look, I, uh, I'm wonderin'—" A deep breath in and he steadied himself. "— I'm... I'm wonderin' if Dad has any of my mom's contact info."

The stunned silence didn't surprise him. Billy was almost certain Susan would simply hang up. Chalk it up to him smoking too much weed.

"Billy are you..." She paused, collecting herself. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I'm sure." He silently prayed she hadn't noticed the millisecond of hesitation.

"Why now, after all this time? Why didn't you ask after the fire?"

"I'm not ready."

"What?"

"I'm not ready," he repeated. "For any of this Susan, and I just... I need my mom."

The words tumbled out and regret soon followed. Admitting he wasn't prepared, that felt natural enough. But admitting he needed Dottie Hargrove... *Fuck*. A cut too deep. Scars of his past had faded, but this one had never fully healed. And here Billy was, ripping off a scab that barely existed.

"William." Her voice wrapped softly but so serious around his full name. "I need you to think carefully about this. She's been out of the

picture for so long, she may not want to hear from you. Do you understand? You trying to talk to her might not go as you have it in your head."

"Good thing I don't have high expectations," Billy replied. God, he needed a cigarette. "I just need her to know I still exist. That I'm doing okay. Having a kid. Y'know, the stuff she deserves to know."

Eyes opened again, zeroing in on the pattern of the countertop. Waiting. He always seemed to be fucking waiting.

"I'll be over later," Susan said, resigned. "I have to find where I put Dottie's information."

His heart skipped. "Where you put it?"

"Your father would've tossed it if I hadn't hidden it away."

The weight of those words sat heavy in his chest. Susan had said them so simply and casually, like Billy should *know* it was fact. And terribly enough, it was. Neil would gladly burn every bit of Dottie Hargrove out of existence if he could. Tried his best to beat the parts of Billy that mirrored her.

"Billy?" came Susan's voice. "Did you hear me?"

"Hm?"

"Do you want me to bring some dinner? Max will be home soon. I figured we could eat as a family, at your place."

"What about Dad?" He leaned against the counter, tapping the pen against the laminate counter. "He's not gonna be pissed dinner won't be ready when he gets home?"

"Oh, he'll be fine," Susan chirped. "He managed for years by himself, one night won't kill him."

Heavy guitar riffs managed to seep through the cracks to the street, a welcome home Chrissy had come to expect. She tried as she walked up to the door to figure out what Billy was blasting the speakers out with, giving a wry smile as she realized it was Danzig.

Turning the doorknob, she was hit with a louder wave of sound. At first glance Billy was nowhere to be found, just the sound of him shouting along with the sound from another room. Following the out of tune singing to the spare room, she found him pounding a nail into the wall. Chrissy bit back a laugh, leaning against the door frame.

“Looks like you got a lot done today,” she said over the music.

The laugh finally erupted as Billy jumped a mile, blonde curls whipping as he turned his head to look at her.

“Jesus, Chris. You scared the shit out of me.”

“Gotta keep you on your toes,” Chrissy shrugged.

Billy let out an annoyed sigh, pushing past her to turn down the stereo. Let his hand brush her stomach and gave a kiss to her forehead as he reentered the room. Chrissy followed him, picking up a few pieces of stray cardboard and bubble wrap as he picked up something from the floor.

“I know you wanted to hang stuff up,” he explained, showing her the framed picture in his grip. “Figured I’d get it done before you got back.”

“Aw, how sweet.” She beamed, taking the picture to inspect it. “How long did the crib take?”

“Too fuckin’ long.” Billy blew a curl out of his face as she giggled. “Faster without you here to hover over me though.”

Chrissy scoffed. “Rude.”

“C’mon, you know it’s true.”

She huffed, handing him the frame back. Billy only rolled his eyes, placing it carefully on the nail.

“That look straight?” he asked.

“Well... It’s straighter than Robin.”

Billy let out a laugh as he adjusted the picture before stepping back. Wrapped his arms around her waist in a way that sent sparks through Chrissy from head to toe.

“Susan and Max are coming over later,” Billy announced, giving her a kiss to the neck. “They’re bringing something for dinner. Susan insisted.”

“That’s nice of them.” Her voice felt far away, mind focused more on the touch of calloused hands snaking under her blouse.

“So,” he continued, “we’ll have some time to ourselves before then. To, y’know, unwind.”

“Unwind,” Chrissy repeated. “Pillow talk, maybe.”

“Whatever you want, pretty girl.” The gruffness of Billy’s voice sent another wave of shivers. It never ceased to have that effect on Chrissy, even when it came at the worst of times. But not in this moment. This moment, she needed to feel every bit as pretty as the word that melted on his tongue.

She placed a kiss on his palm, feeling him roll against her backside.

“Whatever I want, huh?” she teased. “That’s a lot to live up to, Billy. You sure you’re down for that?”

“Just get upstairs before I carry you up myself.”

Chrissy had disappeared into the bathroom, frantic to erase any dishevelment from the bit of pre-dinner fun they had partook in. Billy didn’t see why it mattered much, giving an eye roll before flinging

himself on the couch. Dozed off as Chevy sat by his feet.

The doorbell rang out, jostling Billy from his nap. Peaked out the window, catching Max and Susan's eye. Susan waved with a bright smile, while Max flipped him the bird with a mischievous grin. *Typical.*

"Took you long enough," Billy teased as he opened the door.

"Max decided to stay out with one of her friends, you can blame her," Susan replied.

"I didn't know we had somewhere to be!" Max protested.

"We have burgers and fries, and a big side salad in case anyone feels like being healthy," Susan continued, ignoring Max. As they stepped into the living room, she looked around before giving Billy a quick hug. "Is Chrissy not back yet?"

He took the hug, giving a quick one back. "Nah. She's upstairs fixing her makeup or somethin'. You know how she is."

Susan chuckled as she handed the plastic bags to Max. "Can you take these to the kitchen, Max?"

"You're holding them, Mom. Can't you just do it?"

"*Maxine.*"

A groan befitting Max's teenage self droned from her mouth, giving an eye roll as she took the bags. "Whatever. I'm starting on the fries, though."

With Max out of earshot, Susan quickly retrieved an envelope from her purse. Pressed it with urgency into Billy's hand as he quirked an eyebrow.

"I can't be sure it's all up to date," Susan said, "but it's all there."

"It's better than nothing," Billy replied, staring at the white envelope.

"Billy?"

"Hm?" He looked up, seeing a strange look on Susan's face. Almost a mix of sadness and guilt.

"I'm sorry." She seemed to crumple in the way she sometimes did around Neil. His stomach flipped as she looked back down at the floor. "For not giving this to you sooner, I mean. After everything you've been through... It wasn't my place to hide it away anymore."

"Hey, look at me." Billy took her hand, bending a bit down to her height. Susan looked at him again, those deep blue eyes trying to read him. "There's no hard feelings, okay? You kept it, that's all I care about right now."

"I tried really hard, Billy," Susan said in a low voice. "I know things were rough at home, and I tried my hardest to make you feel like I wasn't the enemy here. And I know I'm not your mother, but I treated you as best I could and I'm *here* —"

Billy would hear no more of it. Pulled her into a hug, smiling into coppery hair. She was right, after all. Susan had done what she could within the minefield of the Hargrove home, even if he hadn't seen it clearly till he left. For his part, he had given her nothing but a stone wall in his grief and anger.

"I know," he whispered. "And like it or not, you're my kid's grandma, right? You're stuck with me."

Susan gave a laugh, pulling away as she patted his shoulder. "Oh, goodness. I can think of worse people to be stuck with than you and Chrissy."

"Mom, food's getting cold," Max called out from the kitchen. She stuffed a french fry in her mouth. "Is Chrissy gonna eat or what?"

"Yeah, I'll grab her," Billy answered, stuffing the envelope in his pocket. "Grab plates. I'm starving."

26. a little peace of mind

There had never been as much nervous energy in the room as that moment.

Chrissy felt it in every cell of her body. Not only nervousness, but fear. Knowledge that no matter how far away she and Billy had gotten from the events of 1984, they always hid somewhere in the background. Preying on their doubts and insecurities.

A thought had been nagging at Billy for months, one he hadn't shared with Chrissy until recently. That, perhaps, something might have passed on to their child. That he had spread the nightmare inadvertently.

"What if I..." Billy had trailed off. A frustrated sigh left him as he held her close. "I hurt too many people already. I need to make sure I didn't hurt another."

She had tried her best to soothe his anxiety. Yet, here they were, in a cold waiting room staring at sterile tile floors. His anxiety had wormed its way into her head, and both knew there would be no reprieve without an expert opinion.

Billy had actually been the one to reach out to Dr. Owens. Did it weeks before Chrissy had even agreed to a checkup, which at first angered her. After all, how *dare* he try to take control of something so intimate to her? The anger had dissipated quickly after she realized just how consuming his fear had become.

There were nights upon nights of him gone from bed, only for her to find him sitting in the living room lit by their dimmest lamp. Sometimes he would be reading, other times the tv would be casting a dim glow with barely a hum of noise coming from it. The worst ones were when she found him with the phone. Some nights he'd only be staring blankly at it, as if debating. Other nights, Chrissy could hear quiet conversations. Always, it seemed, with Max. Talking about things she could never hope to understand.

All Billy wanted, it seemed, was to ensure the safety of the life he had

cobbled together, the people he loved.

And so, Chrissy sat in that cold waiting room, Billy's clammy hand gripping hers. Said no words to him as minutes passed with agonizing sluggishness.

"Well, here's a couple of faces I thought I'd never seen again."

Chrissy's eyes snapped to the door. A vaguely familiar man stood with hands in his white lab coat's pockets. White had crept farther up into the gray of his hair, time apparent on his face. He seemed so pleasant, a far cry from the frazzled man she had locked into the memory of one of the worst nights of her life.

Billy stood, offering out a hand. "Dr. Owens, yeah. It's been a minute, huh?"

Dr. Owens obliged, shaking Billy's hand with friendly vigor. "Too soon, if you ask me. Follow me, you two."

As she stood, Billy put an arm around Chrissy's shoulders. She knew it was an attempt to bring an air of casualness, a way to soothe her. It didn't have the effect it needed.

They sat in a small room with little decor. The memory of Billy's hospital room crept back, goosebumps covering the back of her neck and arms. All of this felt too reminiscent of it. Chrissy had locked those memories away, placed them in a dark part of her mind that sat lonely and still. Being here was like being handed a shovel and instructed to dig up all that was buried.

"Now, I know we spoke a little on the phone," Dr. Owens said as he sat in the chair with a slight grunt, "but let's just make sure we're on the same page."

Chrissy sat silent, giving a glance to Billy. He sat unnervingly still, gears turning in his head.

"I just want to make sure," he finally said. "Doc, there's this part of me that thinks maybe I'm not completely *just* myself. You know? Like, this thought nagging at me that maybe I'm gonna pass on that part of me to my kid. I'm just waitin' for the shoe to drop. That all

the good in my life is *too* good to be true, and it's going to rear its head when my guard's finally down."

She shifted in the lightly padded chair, staring down at her stomach that now took up a significant part of her lap. Thought briefly about how much she hated the pattern of her dress, the way it was cut to try to distract from her growing middle with little of the desired effect. Chrissy wished such shallow annoyances like this were the extent of what plagued her and Billy.

Dr. Owens frowned, tapping on the arm of his chair. "Have you felt strange lately? Heard voices? Anything for concern?"

"Haven't been sleeping well, but that's about it."

Chrissy looked up again to see Dr. Owens lean back in his chair. Billy's face looked unusually pallid, too grave for how easy-going a person he had become over the years.

"Billy, I have to say I do empathize with your concern," Dr. Owens started. "But this may just be pre-parental anxiety. All those tests years ago? That was to make sure nothing was lingering. That you were completely yourself. To be completely honest, if you had any trace of... What did Will Byers call it?"

"The Mind Flayer," Billy answered quickly. Almost embarrassed.

"Yes, the Mind Flayer." Dr. Owens nodded. "If there was any trace of it in you, we wouldn't be having this conversation. You wouldn't be living a normal life. The government would've snatched you up and you'd be playing human experiment."

Chrissy wasn't sure how comforting that was supposed to be. Nearly losing Billy once to death was enough to wrestle with. The what-ifs of never seeing him again because of what had victimized him...

No. It's not worth thinking about. Chrissy pulled her hair from her face and took a deep breath.

"Chrissy."

She snapped to attention at her name. "Yeah?"

“How comfortable are you with doing a few tests?” Dr. Owens asked. Pleasant as always. Nothing pushy in his voice at all.

“I...” The thump of her heart grew faster, the only distraction being a foot somewhere in her hitting her rib. “I’m not really sure. I mean, like, what even can happen to the baby?”

“Worst case scenario?” Dr. Owens said, letting out a hum. “Your baby might be born with some sort of psychic ability. Become someone like Eleven. Which, in my opinion, there are worse things for a child to be born with than extraordinary powers.”

Hands covered her face as Chrissy squeezed her eyes shut again. Let air fill her lungs and rush out in a loud sigh. Too much. All of this was too much, bringing her far too close back to where she had run from years ago.

“Chrissy?” Billy asked softly. “Babe, you okay?”

“Yeah,” she answered, voice muffled. She put her hands down, smoothing her dress. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

“How about this,” Dr. Owens said kindly. “We can just start with an ultrasound. Have you had one at all?”

Chrissy shook her head. “My doctor didn’t feel like it was necessary since we don’t have any family conditions.”

“At the very least it’ll be nice to see what the baby looks like, hm?” Dr. Owens gave a smile. “We’ll count all those fingers and toes, make sure everything’s fine.”

She didn’t bother to look at Billy, who seemed to radiate anxiety. “That’d be nice. I’m okay with that.”

The wait was agonizing. Chrissy had been given instructions to drink

water and wait in another room with Billy for a different doctor she hadn't caught the name of. The longer they stayed the more she hated the sterile surroundings. Hated the feeling that crept up that she was no longer Chrissy, just a guinea pig. She spoke little to Billy, who had tried to carry on a small conversation to no avail. There was no patience in her for small talk. It took everything in her to keep her cool, to not snap at anyone to relieve her own discomfort.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the door. A reed of a woman stepped in, giving a polite smile as she leafed through a chart in her hand.

"Christina and William," she read out. "Looks like we're taking a look at a little one today. Dr. Owens briefed me on your history, William, so I have a few things I'll be looking out for."

"Like what?" he asked. Chrissy could tell the curiosity in his voice was genuine.

"Deformities, anything over or under developed. There's not much to look for besides making sure baby is growing right and there's nothing funny going on."

There was little talk after. The doctor started up the machine, the quiet hum filling the room as she went to work. Chrissy gave a small jump at the cool gel on her stomach, then to the ultrasound wand. Held her breath as the black screen started to pick up a white form as it chugged along.

"There we go!" exclaimed the doctor. "Look at that little darling."

Chrissy barely registered what she said, too engrossed in the image before her. Barely even noticed Billy's hand squeezing her own in a vice grip.

A little head, then a hand. A body that wasn't the plump size of what she remembered Cam or Caitlin looking like as newborns, but slowly was on its way.

A baby. A real, actual baby.

"Jesus," Billy breathed.

"Looks good," the doctor said, pressing a button on the machine every time she found a new angle. We'll have to study the images a little closer, but it's all there. See? You can even see the little fingers."

"Billy, you're gonna break my hand," Chrissy said, giving him a look.

"Sorry." He didn't bother glancing her way, the image on the screen consuming him. His hand let go, instead finding itself on her shoulder. "I just... *Fuck*. There's a baby in there."

Chrissy couldn't help but let out a small snort, looking back at the small screen.

"Do you want to know?" the doctor asked.

The question hit straight into her heart, a searing worry growing again.

"Know what?" Chrissy asked, eyebrows furrowing.

"The sex."

They looked at each other in stunned silence. Chrissy bit at her lip, drawing in a breath. So much information was being thrown at her today. This at least would be good news. Something fun to mill over for the next few months. One thing she could rely on in a vast ocean of *what-ifs* and unknowns.

"I mean, it'd be nice to know," she said slowly. "Billy?"

"Go for it," he answered. Too much in a daze from what he had already seen.

"Chrissy, take a look." The doctor turned the screen a bit more towards her. "You see there? That's the baby's legs. We're going to adjust a bit to see if we see anything."

"Seems like an invasion of privacy," she joked dryly. The laugh the doctor gave reassured her.

"Looks like a girl to me," the doctor piped up as the wand glided over

Chrissy's stomach. "Congrats on your little girl, she looks perfect so far."

"A girl," Billy repeated.

"You got a problem with that?" Chrissy quirked an eyebrow.

"Nope," he grinned, giving her a kiss. "I'm already outnumbered with you and Chevy, what's one more?"

Chrissy laughed. It felt like the first real laugh she had given in a week.

"I think we're about done, then," the doctor remarked. "You can get cleaned up and go back to room four. I'll hand over the images to Dr. Owens. Did you want copies?"

"Yes," Billy replied, not a hesitation or thought. "Chris, we can show your parents. And Susan and Max, they'll wanna see."

A grin spread across Chrissy's face. Those blue eyes sparkled, the waves not turbulent this time, instead animated with his giddiness. She had longed for that joy. Craved it for his well-being, and her own selfish reasons.

"They'll lose their minds," she grinned. "Bet you ten bucks Susan's going to cry."

"Well, there you have it." Dr. Owens flipped through the notes from the other attending doctor. "What's our plan, kids? We can do more testing if it puts your minds at ease, but I can't guarantee it'll confirm anything."

Billy felt Chrissy's nervous gaze shift to him. He swallowed, trying to find his center in the whirlpool of giddiness and anxiety.

“I think we need to talk it over,” he said.

“Of course. I’ll give you two some time.” A hand patted Billy’s shoulder, paternal in a way he rarely was awarded, before Dr. Owens left the room.

As the door clicked shut, Billy couldn’t find the strength to turn to look at Chrissy. Sat in the mire of his own thoughts, trying to come up with words to comfort and, perhaps, a plan of action.

“I want her to have a pretty name,” Chrissy said suddenly. “Strong but pretty. Like Lita Ford, she has such a pretty name, y’know?”

Billy turned to look at her, breath hitching. Although her mouth sat in a grim line, those hazel eyes were far off in the dreams of their future. Here she was again, tethering him to the safety of their plans. Eased his bones, fought against beasts his mind made up with such bravery he could hardly believe.

Would their daughter be the same? Would she inherit Chrissy’s fortitude, or would she take from him the cowardice and hard demeanor he had built to hide it all? He hoped she would only take a little of him, the best parts that seemed so small sometimes.

“I don’t want to put you through anything else,” he murmured. “You or the kid. I’ve done those tests, Chris. They’re hell, and I can’t do that to the two of you.”

She caught his eyes, sat in silence for a few beats. Took his hand with such care, thumb rubbing against his skin that longed for the impending summer.

“You’re sure?”

He hated the doubt in her voice. As if he would change his mind on a whim once they left the building. Billy left his chair, taking a place on his knees in front of Chrissy. Took in the glow of her face, her doll lips and wide eyes that had seen little sleep the last month. Hands reached out, one grabbing hers and the other resting atop her belly.

“I’m sure,” he answered. “I’m sorry, Chris. For scaring you and getting so paranoid for no fucking reason.”

"It's not for no reason," she protested. "I know you're scared, Billy. The past is always going to be scary to look back at. But this thing is *gone*, it doesn't have control over you or me or our baby, okay? Just like Neil. He has no control. Nothing that hurt you back then can hurt us, okay? Focus on now. We can figure it all out later."

Chrissy stood, taking his hands as he followed suit. Arms enveloped him, their embrace holding one more person between them. She breathed calm into him, he exhaled understanding and gratefulness.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," she said, her breath hitting his chest. "Let's tell Dr. Owens and go. This places gives me the creeps."

27. need you here

Seven months down, two to go.

It was Chrissy's mantra as of late. Although she dared not to say it aloud, Chrissy had grown tired already of sharing her body with someone else. Dreamed of the day she was no longer *Chrissy the pregnant woman*, or *Chrissy who can't smoke or drink*. Longed for days back where she could exist without stares from the older women in Hawkins, knowing their whispers branched from one to another like ivy up a wall.

This far along, she cared less. Played a game with them even; taking jabs when she could at the fact that Billy was — *and had been for years* — a coveted bronze god among their Midwest men and she was the lucky receiver of his affections. Flaunted that she had what they could only dream of in their white picket fence houses with their inattentive husbands.

Her petty game passed the time, at least. With Billy at work, Max at school, and Annette and Steve busy with their own lives, Chrissy had to pass the time somehow.

That afternoon, she busied herself with a now cold mug of coffee and a baby name book she had become engrossed in. There had been many arguments the past month on a name, mostly revolving around Billy's extremely out there choices. Ziggy had been the most recent one, which Chrissy had vetoed immediately.

"It's different!" Billy had said defensively. *"And we both like David Bowie. It's cool, c'mon."*

"Yeah, it's cool, but she's gotta live with the name for her whole life," Chrissy shot back. *"It's like you're trying to make sure she gets made fun of at school."*

So she sat, jotting down names on a notepad that rolled sweetly in her mouth. Pretty things that she knew their daughter deserved. She could quietly exist with her name unless she wanted to go by a loud nickname.

The harsh ring of the phone in the kitchen broken Chrissy's dreamy thoughts. She blew a lock of hair out of her face that had escaped her barrette, letting the book fall into the cushion as she left the comfort of the sofa.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," she muttered as it continued to ring. Probably was her mom, ready to lovingly bother her again.

"Hello?"

"Hi," came an unfamiliar voice. "Is... Is Billy there? Billy Hargrove?"

Chrissy's brow furrowed, slouching against the wall. "Uh, he's out of the house right now. Can I take a message?"

"Oh." The woman's voice dropped low, disappointment apparent. "Well, I suppose. Could you... Tell him Dottie Peck called? I got his letter."

Letter? There had been no mention of a letter; of talks with someone far away to send correspondence. Questions swirled in her head, worry taking a hold of part of her brain.

"I'm sorry," Chrissy said, "but can I ask who you are? I'm just kind of confused. He's never mentioned a Dottie Peck."

There was a palpable silence. Hesitation, perhaps fear. A shuddering sigh on the other end sounded out, like the woman was steadying herself.

"I'm Billy's mother."

Chrissy nearly dropped the phone. Her heart dropped to her stomach, unable to comprehend the words in their entirety for a few moments. When did this happen? How did he find her? Why had Billy not *told* her about this?

"Jesus Christ," she finally muttered.

"Sorry?"

"No, no, I mean this is really great," Chrissy quickly said. "I'm glad

you called. I'm just, like, really confused. He never said he... found you."

"It was quite a surprise," Dottie admitted. "I don't mean to assume, but are you Chrissy? He mentioned a girl he was seeing by that name."

"Y-Yeah. That's me, all right." She closed her eyes to gather herself. "I'm sure he had some choice words about me in that letter."

Dottie laughed, light and airy. "Nothing but glowing reviews, actually. There was so much he said in so few words, I have to admit I'm trying to play catch up now."

Chrissy let out a snort. "That sounds like Billy, all right."

"How long have you two been together?"

"Uh," Chrissy let out a long breath, trying to figure the math out. "Technically since senior year, I guess. You know how high school relationships go, things can get dicey for a bit. But we've been together for a long time now."

"I hope I'm not being too forward, asking questions," she said, almost apologetic.

"Nah, not at all." The cord rippled against itself as she walked to the counter, leaning on the cool surface. "Like I said, he didn't mention a letter at all. I'm not sure what he even told you."

There was a thoughtful pause. "Well, he wrote a good amount about you. And that you two are having a baby, congratulations! My goodness, that aged me a bit when I read that. It doesn't hit you that your baby's grown so much until they tell you they're having a baby themselves."

"Thank you," she said politely. "I'm sure I'll find out how that feels sooner or later."

"I'm just so happy," Dottie continued, a bit of teariness to her voice. "That he wanted me to know. I've missed so much and I can't wrap my head around some of it."

Chrissy's mouth fell into a small frown. "Like what?"

"Well, his accident, for one thing." Another pause. "He briefly mentioned a fire, him being in the hospital. Neil never said a word to me about it."

Down again went her heart to the pit of her stomach. The heaviness on her chest returned, threatening to smother her as Chrissy wracked her brain for the correct words.

"Dottie, I'm so sorry." The phrase, so seemingly meaningless, was the only thing that managed to escape her mouth. "I'm so, so sorry."

"I am too," Dottie replied quietly. "Chrissy, what happened?"

Such a tall order, to retell a lie constructed to protect so many people. To protect the fragility of society. It had been so long since she had to rustle up the tale. Eyes flew up to look at the ceiling, noting a small bit of paint that had gone missing.

"Like he said, there was a fire at the mall. The details are kind of fuzzy, but his step-sister Max and her friends were in there after close, and he went in to rescue them." The script returned with much more ease than she anticipated. "Part of the structure fell on him. He was in the hospital for a long time. Had to learn how to walk again and everything."

The silence on the other end of the phone made her want to scream. To tell the horrible truth, that Billy had been part of something much terrible that he had no control over, but he *fought*. He had won and lived, and that it meant everything.

"Dottie?"

"I'm still here," she said meekly. "It's a lot, Chrissy."

I know, Chrissy thought. So much more than you'll ever know.

"He's so much better now," Chrissy offered. "A-And he's so happy. I've never seen him this happy before. Like, I would've liked him to *not* almost die in a freak accident, but it definitely got him on a totally different path than before—"

"I'm glad," Dottie interrupted. "God knows he deserves to be happy after everything he's gone through."

Chrissy nodded. Truer words could not have been said. "Yeah."

"I have to go," came Dottie's voice, more tired than before. All that information would tire anyone out, especially with Chrissy's penchant to word vomit. "You'll let him know I called?"

"Of course," Chrissy said dutifully. "I can jot down your number. Have him call you back tonight."

"I'd like that, Chrissy." She could almost hear the smile in Dottie's voice. "You're very sweet. I'm glad Billy has that in his life."

It was hell waiting for Billy to return home.

Agitation filled the entirety of their flat. Swirled like terrible smoke around her ankles, a quagmire of confusion and questions that refused to dissipate. Every time Chrissy felt she had a concrete understanding of Billy and his mind, it seemed to slip from her grasp. Sometimes it felt hopeless to comprehend the cogs turning in his brain.

The clock hit 7:04pm and the front door clicked open. Billy wordlessly kicked off his work boots, the smell of oil filtering into Chrissy's nose.

"Hard day?" she asked.

"I'm gonna kill Preston," he said back, storming past and only stopping to press a kiss into her hair. "Asshole nearly cut off his finger with the grinder and I had to take over the truck he was workin' on."

"How'd he manage that?" she asked incredulously.

“Don’t wanna talk about it. I need a shower and a beer.”

Chrissy knew to leave it well alone. Let him cool off, find his peace again. He’d need it for the story of her day she’d be telling him soon enough.

Billy returned to the living room an hour later, clean and face exhausted but relaxed. Chrissy had busied herself in the kitchen, trying to figure out the dinner situation for that night. She gave him a glance, eyebrow raised. In return he flipped her off with a cheeky smirk.

“Why are you so weird?” she muttered.

“Years of practice, sunshine,” he called out, plopping on the couch. “You figure out what you wanna do for dinner?”

“No,” Chrissy admitted. “Might be a Chinese night.”

“Not gonna complain ‘bout that.” The sound of his lighter flicking on and off filled the room as he contemplated. “Your day go okay? Better than mine?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” Feet padded across the living room, Chrissy letting her arms drape around Billy’s shoulders. A kiss to his head, and a small chuckle came from his chest. “Your mom called, so that kind of threw me off today.”

The lighter clicked close again. She felt him tense up under her embrace, watching as fingers let go of the metal. It plopped between his thighs, arm going limp despite his intensity.

“My mom?” Billy echoed.

“Yeah,” Chrissy said, swallowing. “Your mom.”

“She spoke to you?”

“I answered the phone, idiot, of course we spoke.”

“Shut up, you know what I meant.” A rough hand touched hers, thumb rubbing against her wrist. “What’d she say? Did you guys actually talk or...?”

Chrissy pulled away, feeling her back twinge from her awkward position. Felt those blue eyes watching as she sunk into the seat next to Billy, taking his hand again. One look at his face, and her heart thudded hard.

He looked so young in that moment. A boy asking about his mother, hope and fear fusing together into a new emotion so powerful he couldn’t hold it back if he wanted.

“We talked for a while,” Chrissy said, giving a little smile. “I really wish you had told me you got ahold of her. She knew who I was right away, it was kind of weird.”

A hushed apology left him, eyes flitting down. Her fingers brushed away loose golden curls, hoping he’d look at her again.

“She was really nice,” she offered. “And so excited about being a grandma. I tried to catch her up on things as much as I could, but I really think it’s something she’d rather hear from you.”

“I didn’t think she’d call,” Billy almost whispered. “Fuck. I thought... *Fuck*. I don’t know what I thought. I didn’t think this far ahead.”

“Like you ever do,” Chrissy laughed. “I think it’s good though, this time at least.”

“Did you tell her I’d call her back?” he asked.

“Of course I did?”

“And you have her number?”

“Jesus Christ, Billy, of course I have her number. And I made sure it was right.”

“I’m just checking!” he huffed. “You’ve been so fuckin’ scatterbrained lately, y’know?”

Chrissy let out an exasperated yell, burying her face in his shoulder. She felt it shake, hearing him hold back a laugh.

“Look, I’ll go pick up food,” she said. “You call her while I’m gone so you have privacy or whatever.”

“And if I don’t call her?”

“Then I’m eating your food too,” she declared. “Figure out what you want, I’m hungry.”

Chrissy had left on her expedition for their dinner, leaving Billy to stew in his feelings by himself. He knew it had to be done, but Chrissy pushing him in the way she always managed to do only served to make him irate. He wanted his fucking dinner. He knew she would stonewall him until he spoke to Dottie Peck. Moreso, Billy knew he’d have to live with the pit in his stomach until he grew some balls and picked up the phone.

Teeth grit together and his jaw set as he stared at the phone anchored to the wall. Eyes glanced over the piece of paper with Chrissy’s bubbly handwriting, then back to the phone. A frustrated groan, and he picked up the damn thing, carefully typing the numbers.

One ring.

Two rings.

I could hang up now. I could just hang up—

Three rings.

“Hello?”

The deepness of the voice on the other end startled him. Any nerve he had seemed to slip, but at the last moment, he grabbed a hold of

it, hoisting it back up like britches too big for his body.

“Hi, uh, is Dottie there?” he asked.

“Sure thing. Hold on a moment,” came the pleasant answer before the sound muffled.

Just like the days that had stretched on forever since his letter had been sent, the seconds after the man’s last words felt like an eternity. Billy felt his whole body buzz, almost shake, with a mix of fear and excitement.

“This is Dottie,” came the heaven of a voice. “May I ask who’s calling?”

He saw stars. He saw the moon and the sun, all blinding and beautiful.

“It’s...” he swallowed, eyes squeezing shut so tightly they may never open again. “It’s Billy.”

Billy could hear a hitch in her breath.

“Billy,” she repeated in her honeyed voice. “Oh, my love. You sound so... so—”

“Adult?” he tried.

Her little laugh filled his senses. “Yes, adult. My goodness. Oh, honey, it’s so good to hear your voice.”

His eyes still hadn’t opened, the desire to find a memory of her face to match the voice taking over. “Yours too, Mom.”

“So, you’re still in Indiana,” Dottie said slowly. “I would’ve thought you’d come back by now. You always hated being cold.”

For a moment, Billy wondered how many times she had poured over his letter. The little things he had written, vague details of what he had been up to since she had left. What exactly was said between her and Chrissy.

"Yeah, me too." Billy paused, pulling out a chair from his counter. "Plans changed, I guess."

"I can't imagine you anywhere but here."

"I came back," he said. "A few years ago. Chrissy and me, I mean. We were in San Diego. I would've come by but I didn't—"

The words sank deep in his chest, blowing away like little grains of sand.

I didn't know where you were.

I didn't know if you still wanted me.

"Oh, honey." He could hear the beginning of tears in her voice. "I'm so sorry."

"Who answered the phone?" he asked, trying to change the subject. Willing for the hurt feelings that bubbled under his skin to fade.

"Oh, that's Marty." A pause. "My husband."

"Husband," Billy echoed. So she had moved on. "He's good to you?"

"The best I could ask for," Dottie said, a hint of pride in her voice. "You'd like him, I think. And his daughter, Erin. She reminds me of that neighbor girl who always wanted to play dress-up with you. You remember her?"

"Yeah," he smiled. "I hated it."

Dottie's laugh filled his ears once more. A swell of contentment straightened his spine, knowing that he had been the cause.

"Oh, my love," she sighed. "I really hoped one day this would happen. Dreamt of it every night."

"You could've called."

"I tried." He heard that tearful sound in her voice again, hitting him like a brick. "I tried so many times, for years. The last I heard from

your dad, you were moving and he had to check in to make sure my number was still the same. He never even told me where you moved to, Billy.”

There was no surprise there. “Did he even try to tell you I got hurt?”

There was that terrible quiet again, itself enough to derive meaning from.

“No. Your letter was the first I heard about it.” Dottie’s breath hitched again. “Chrissy explained it a little more, but god, Billy. You could’ve been dead and I’m not sure I would’ve known. I could have a nervous breakdown just thinking about it.”

He didn’t know what was worse. The thought that had simmered in him that she could be dead and he would’ve floated through life never knowing, or that the opposite could have been true. That neither would’ve known of the other’s fate.

“He should’ve told you,” Billy finally said. “Or Susan should’ve called. Someone should’ve said *something*.”

“I know, my love,” Dottie said. Voice like velvet, trying to smooth over his anger. “You know how your father is. His grudges never fade, the anger just stays no matter what the circumstances.”

“I was left to rot in that house with him, Mom,” he blurted out, voice wavering. “And I felt myself becoming more like Dad every day, this horrible person I hate even *thinking* about.”

Silence.

How long had he waited to say those words to her?

Terrible words. An icepick to the brain, searing all the nerve endings it touched and spreading further and deeper than imagined. He had mourned for so long, held so much anger towards both her and his father. Wished with every ounce of his being to stop existing if no one would dare to step up and rescue him.

In the stunned silence, he contemplated it all. Realized that he had been saved by so many people, whether he had known at the time or

not. Dottie Peck had saved him, saved the world from a terrible fate, whether she knew it or not. He couldn't hold on to any anger towards her. Not even if he wanted to.

"I wish with all my heart I could've taken you with me. The courts weren't kind, Billy. They made it impossible, and I wish I could take it back and try harder. I'm just hoping... I'm hoping you'll forgive me. That you still want me around."

"I wouldn't have wrote to you if I didn't want you around." Billy sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Look, Mom, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"No, you have every right to feel that way," Dottie interrupted. "We can talk about something else, honey. Like the baby. Or Chrissy. She sounds like such a sweet girl."

Billy can't help but smile. "Yeah, she's great. Greatest thing that ever happened to me in this shitty town. You'll love her, Mom."

"I bet I will." Her tone was pleasant again. "Would you want me there?"

"What do you mean?"

"When the baby comes, honey."

His mind scatters into a thousand pieces, heart thudding away in his chest. Reality seemed to keep bending and breaking within their conversation, and it was all he could do to cling to something concrete.

"You... You want to?" Billy asks. "I mean, even with Dad here?"

"Only if you want me there," Dottie said quickly. "We can work around your dad. He doesn't even need to know I'm there, Billy."

"Yeah." He swallowed hard, nodding to no one. "Please. Please come up."

I need you here with me.

The door opened, Chevy letting out a mew as Chrissy shuffled in. He locked eyes with her, watching as a grin bloomed on her face. She raised a finger to her lips, and moved silently to set down their feast.

“Look, I, uh,” he said quickly, “I gotta go. Chris just got back with our food and I don’t want it to get cold.”

“Yes, of course,” Dottie answered. “Billy?”

“Yeah, Mom?” The more he said the word, the easier it seemed to slip off the tongue.

“Can I call you again? I know the long distance rates are rough, but —”

“Yeah, you can,” he interrupted. “Chris and I did the long distance thing, so I’m used to the phone bills, believe me.”

“She never said anything about that.”

“It’s a story for a different time.” He paused. “I’m gonna go, okay?”

“Have a good night, Billy,” she said, heaven singing his name. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.” The words rattled in the air, having laid dormant for sixteen years. “Have a good night.”

He didn’t speak much after that. Chrissy seemed to understand, letting him eat as he processed what had just happened. It was only once the dishes had hit the sink and bubbles foamed on a sponge that she spoke up.

“Did it go okay?”

Billy glanced sideways at her. “Yeah, it went fine.”

“Good.” An awkward pause, and Chrissy tapped her nails on the countertop. “What’d you talk about? Anything interesting?”

“She’s got a husband. And a step-daughter.” Billy paused, placing a plate on the drying rack. “Which, good for her. She deserves to be happy for once.”

Chrissy let out a murmur before turning away, grabbing a Diet Coke out of the fridge. Moved past him, hip bumping into his body as she turned the radio on. “Anything else?”

He let out a small sigh. Wished she would have just sat in the living room and watched tv or something. Yelled at him over something trivial. Any semblance of normalcy would’ve been appreciated.

“We talked about the kid.” He didn’t leave room for her to wheedle another question in, instead dropping a fork on the rack. “She wants to come here to visit when the kid’s born.”

He heard the can hit the counter behind him with a thud.

“You’re kidding.”

“Why would I joke about that?” The tenseness returned to his voice. “I mean, I’m happy she wants to, but it’s so *fast*.”

He heard Chrissy sigh behind him, then the radio cut in and out of stations as she fiddled with it. *Valerie* by Steve Windwood blasted out for a second before she turned it to another station.

“Hey, no,” he called out, turning to her. “Turn it back. That’s a good song.”

“Fine,” she muttered, letting Windwood’s voice fill the kitchen. After a beat, she piped up. “That’s a pretty name. Valerie.”

“Where’s your name book? Look up what it means.”

He shook off water from his hands, wiping on a hand towel as he watched her flip through. Gave a smile as her face went serious, intent on her quest.

“Valerie,” she read aloud, hazel eyes glancing up at him before returning to the page. “‘*Strong, brave, valiant, fierce*’. Huh.”

“Sounds like her, all right,” Billy chimed in, hopping over the couch to sit despite Chrissy’s disapproving look.

“You think she’d be okay being named after a song we randomly heard?” Chrissy mused.

“Kids have been named after worse.” He pulled her close, pressing his lips to her stomach. “Valerie Hargrove. Flows nice.”

“She still needs a middle name,” Chrissy murmured. He closed his eyes as her fingers ran through his hair. Took in the comfort of her touch, the warmth of her body.

“Ziggy.”

“Stop it,” she groaned. Billy laughed as she flicked him in the head, giving her stomach a smattering of kisses.

“Valerie Ziggy Hargrove.”

“You’re mental.”

“You chose to stick around,” he grinned up at her. “Who’s the mental one, hm?”

Chrissy rolled her eyes, pushing him off to sit. The radio filled the resumed comfortable quiet, her shoulders rising and falling against his as she breathed.

“You don’t have to keep up with your mom if you don’t want to, you know.” She sighed, leaning her head against him, hair ticking his arm. “After the baby comes, you can decide what to do.”

“I know,” he replied. “One big thing at a time.”

28. together, now and forever

She hated every moment of this week.

Too big to function or sleep at this point, Chrissy was irritated beyond belief. She wasn't proud of it, but there had been a few times she had grabbed her stomach and told, nearly *yelled* at, Valerie to get out. Billy found it both amusing and a little concerning.

Patty and Susan were on rotating shifts to keep Chrissy company while Billy was at work. It felt like she was being babysat. Without them though, she would barely be able to get around the house. The thought of being alone at this point, so close to the end, was nerve-wracking. At the current moment, her mother was sitting with her on the sofa, watching as Chrissy angrily flipped through a magazine.

"You were late, you know," Patty mentioned out of the blue. "Almost a week and a half. Your father nearly had a nervous breakdown."

"So it's a family trait?" Chrissy answered, staring at a spread of different summer dresses. "Wonderful. Makes me feel better."

"Tonight or tomorrow, honey. She'll come."

"She better."

"Did you try—"

"Yes . I've tried it all, Ma."

Patty's lips became a thin line, a sigh coming from her. "There's no need to get snippy."

Chrissy set aside the magazine, wincing as she readjusted. Fingers stroked slow circles around her stomach, the shallow breaths making her feel every bit as huge as she looked.

"You'll look back and be thankful you had an extra week with her," Patty said gently. "It's different once they're born. They aren't just yours anymore. Right now, it's just you and Valerie."

"I know," she replied quietly. "I just want to see her already."

Billy returned from work and found the house quiet.

It was concerning, with the space usually filled with music or Chrissy's relentless chatter. She hadn't said anything about going out today, not that Chrissy left the house much the last week anyway. A quick look in the kitchen; no note. He looked around, finding the nursery empty, then the back porch.

"Chrissy?" he called out. "You home?"

Nothing.

He blew out a sigh, pulling his hair higher onto his head. The heat was unbearable today, humidity clinging to his skin like a layer of glue. Up the stairs he went, shedding layer after layer until he stood in his underwear at the open door of their bedroom with a handful of clothes.

Chrissy sat inside on their bed, a fan pointed directly at her nude frame. She seemed to be lost in her own world, concentrating hard on something he couldn't fathom.

"Chris, you okay?"

She opened an eye. "No. Hot."

"Poor thing," he murmured. "Any changes?"

"No," she said irritably. "Don't remind me."

The bed creaked as Billy crept behind her, hands cupping her rounded breasts. One hand trailed down the dome of her stomach, finding a resting place in an area she hadn't seen for months. He had gleefully explored it in her stead, relearning this new body. What made it tick, what new ways he could tease a moan out of her.

"I read somewhere that sex can get everything going," he grinned. "Have a little fun before Val decides to show up, y'know?"

"It's too hot," Chrissy shot back. "I'm not in the mood."

He let out a defeated sigh. Removed his hands, instead wrapping them around her middle with some difficulty. She sunk back against his body, seemingly ignoring the slight erection against her backside. Sunkissed breasts rose and fell before her palm covered his hand, fingers weaving with his.

"I'm scared," she admitted. Quiet, almost girlish.

"I know, pretty girl." He kissed her shoulder, feeling the breeze from the fan. "Me too."

"You're still gonna marry me, right?" Chrissy asked suddenly.

Billy tilted his head, seeing wide hazel eyes peering at him. He wished that he could just lazily count the freckles on her face instead of answering. Hated that the thought of him backing out even crossed her mind. Instead, he scoffed.

"Of course I'm still gonna marry you." Eyes rolled as sandy curls fell off his shoulder. Y'think I'm gonna miss out on seeing these tits in that dress you keep showing me?"

"Perv." The word had no bite to it, just relief.

"We could've done it months ago," he shrugged. "Like my dad said. Hell, we could go to the courthouse now if you want."

"No," she protested, "I don't want a stupid courthouse wedding. *Especially* right now. It be fucking miserable."

"Then trust me. Okay?" Billy leaned in for another kiss, thumb rubbing against her stomach. "I'm gonna be here so long you're gonna wish you could get rid of me."

A soft laugh came from Chrissy, an almost musical thing that stormed through his veins. He wished he could bottle it. Carve it deep into a record, where it could exist outside of time for him to play whenever

he wanted.

Show time.

The phrase echoed in his head. Everything was a blur after Chrissy had given the signal. A panicked call to the DiMartino home. Another call to his mother, giving her the go-ahead to fly out. Bags thrown haphazardly in the back of the Camaro, mind blanking as her hand held his so tight he couldn't feel a few of his fingers. The drive to the hospital would forever be lost in his recollection the days and years following.

At the hospital, it was worse.

Hours blended together as boredom and pain alternated their hold on Chrissy. He hated it. Resented the fact that he could do so little for her besides trying to keep her mind off the impending moment. Billy had read the books. Gone to classes despite his reservations, had learned what he could to be as present and helpful as he could. And yet, he often sat just watching as Patty DiMartino so effortlessly coached Chrissy through contractions. Comforting Chrissy in a way he could never replicate.

He needed a cigarette. He needed a drink. Wanted to run out to the Camaro and just scream into the discarded blanket in the back to force the panic from his body.

Five hours.

Patty had gone home at Chrissy's insistence. Sleep came in contained moments for the both of them, adrenaline pushing the boundaries of awakesness. Billy would find rest, only to be awoken by pained groans.

"You're sure you don't want your mom back?" Billy asked. Worry weighed heavy on his brow, rubbing Chrissy's back as she leaned off the bed.

"I'm sure," she said through gritted teeth. "For now, at least. At least one of us should get some sleep, y'know?"

"Doubt she's sleeping," he mused, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Highly doubt anyone is, Chris."

Eight hours.

"Billy?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you come hold me?" Chrissy's request was barely audible, as if a secret no one was allowed access to. "Please?"

She sat at the side of the bed, face grim and blotched with red. Without a word, he sat. Held her close, kissing that beautiful face and rubbing lazy circles around her stomach.

"It's okay, pretty girl," he whispered. "It'll be over soon. You'll be okay, I'm right here."

The words repeated like a mantra, a wish for her comfort. Billy wasn't sure how useful they were, but it was better than his panicked silence.

"This sucks."

He laughed at how matter-of-fact she was.

"I'm serious," she griped. "I'm never doing this again. Ever."

"Whatever you want, Chris," Billy answered. "You do make a cute pregnant chick, though."

"This is not cute," she protested, gesturing to herself.

"Says you," he shrugged. "I'll let you know if I feel the same once you start pushing."

Fifteen hours.

The way the doctor hovered over Chrissy made him nervous. Checking her vitals, asking quiet questions as eyes went back and forth to her chart.

"She's got a fever," the doctor stated to the nurse. "Christina, it looks like we're going to have to move things along in a different way. We don't want any more unneeded stress on you or baby, right?"

"Right," Chrissy answered quietly.

"We're going to do a caesarean and get this all over," the doctor continued. "Carey, can you get the OR prepped?"

"A C-section?" Billy piped up. "Now?"

"The sooner the better," the doctor said kindly. "There's no need for Christina to be in more pain than she needs to."

He shot a worried glance at Chrissy, only to be met with the same fear. Hers felt different; resolved, almost resigned.

"He's allowed in, right?" Chrissy asked. "He can be there when she's born?"

"Of course, honey," the doctor soothed. "Billy, we'll have you get suited up in scrubs while we get Christina ready."

"Well then," Billy muttered under his breath. "Show time."

12:29 am, June 22nd 1990.

There was a congratulatory cheer that swept through the OR, then a sharp cry.

Chrissy felt nothing, at first. Too full of the wonders of modern medicine to fully comprehend what has happened, she turned her eyes to Billy. He stared in rapt wonder just beyond the light blue sheet, taking in a shaky breath.

"She's here, Chris," he murmured. "God, she's pretty. Just like you."

"Can I see her?" Chrissy whispered. "Right now?"

"Give us a quick second, honey," the doctor said, somehow hearing her. "We'll get her cleaned up and cozy."

Seconds seemed to go on for days. Billy pressed his head against her own, leaving drops of what she could only presume were happy tears against her skin. In his touch, she felt awake again. Aware of every little sound and touch, the moment so preserved in electric memory that it could never leave her.

"Proud of you," he whispered, kissing her face.

"They did all the work," Chrissy mumbled, giving a sly smile. Billy gave a quiet laugh and kissed her again.

One of the nurses emerged from beyond the blue curtain, smiling broadly. In her arms lay a small pink head amid a bundle of white and blue.

"How about we have Dad hold her?" the nurse suggested. "Let Mom see her up close."

A tinge of jealousy lit in Chrissy's chest as Billy took their daughter in his arms. It died as soon as it had come, watching with bated breath as the nurse taught him how to cradle the newborn, where to place his hands to support her.

"It's only for a little," the nurse said apologetically. "We have to do vitals on the little lady, get her bathed and diapered. Mom has to get

stitched up, and then we'll bring her to your room."

"They aren't done yet?" Chrissy asked absentmindedly, looking at the wrinkled face amid the blanket. "Billy, she's blonde."

"I know," came his dreamy answer. "Here I thought she'd come out looking just like you."

"Pretty sure there's enough of me in the world," she murmured.

Billy shrugged softly, lidded eyes trained on the bundle in his arms. "I dunno. A Chrissy lookalike doesn't sound so bad."

The fear had faded, and in its absence left a new one. Nothing terrible that she wouldn't be able to handle. Just worries she assumed everyone else had. Whether she would be a good mother. If Valerie would love her. If Billy would continue to love her.

It all was just background noise, in the end. Wheeled back into her room, still numb from the chest down, Chrissy watched as Billy took his turn again with Valerie, holding her as if he would break her.

"I can already tell she's gonna like you better," Chrissy joked.

"Barely," he answered, flashing a tiny smile her way. "You wanna try holding her again?"

Chrissy nodded. The first time after being returned to her room, the weight had felt too much on her body. Perhaps now she could hold Valerie close, soak up that newborn smell and just stare. Take in the little human she had grown for nearly a year.

Little lashes fluttered open, dark eyes making a small appearance before sleepily closing again. She made no sound, just breathed and flexed her tiny hand around Chrissy's finger.

Valerie didn't belong just to her anymore. The thought echoed in her head, a lump growing in her throat. She belonged to the entire family, to the world.

For so long, Chrissy had felt like she and Valerie held secrets between themselves, a knowledge of this little girl that no one else had quite yet. Now, they would know. The secrets would be no more. More than just the weight of her daughter lay on her chest.

"You okay?"

Chrissy gave a glance in Billy's direction. Tiredness had written its tale on his face in dark circles, a warning of sleepless nights to come. But there was peace in those tired eyes, a rarity that she soaked up to lock away with the rest of today's memory.

"I'll be fine," Chrissy replied, brushing a finger against Val's wrinkled face. "It's just... a lot."

Lips pressed into her hair, long since tied back with a scrunchy Billy had wrestled from the hospital bag. He had taken a scrunchie for himself, long hair pulled back low into a ponytail. Chrissy had made fun of him for it earlier; Billy had said nothing, only rolling his eyes.

"You should get some sleep, Chris." His voice sat low, soothing despite the rasp.

"Not yet." Her eyes took in the small human in her arms, letting out a sigh. "I need some time with her."

The call had come as Max was brushing her teeth, winding down for the night.

Her mom had answered the phone, still awake as she had been every night this week in anticipation. From the bathroom, Max could hear her name being called out frantically.

In any other circumstance, she would've been afraid. Either of what news had come from the other person on the phone, or from Neil who had gone to bed an hour before. But Neil had taken to stuffing ear plugs in every night since being told Chrissy's due date was

drawing near, and the excitement in her mom's voice was undeniable.

The toothbrush dropped in its holder with a clatter, footsteps thundering as Max found her mom in the kitchen. Bleary-eyed, but giving a smile so broad and hopeful it only made Max grin.

"She's here, Max," her mother said, holding a hand over the phone's receiver. "Billy said Chrissy just got out of the OR and the baby's doing great."

Max felt her smile drop. "Why was she in the OR? Did something happen?"

"Just a hiccup," Susan said gently. "She had a C-section is all."

Relief washed over her, hand sweeping through the long copper waves atop her head. "When can we see them? Tomorrow?"

Susan held up a finger as she spoke into the phone. "Will you two be okay for visitors tomorrow? Mhm. Eight works fine for us. Get some sleep, Billy."

Max leaned in over her mother's shoulder. "Congratulations!"

"Did you hear her?" Susan continued. She turned to Max, giving a smile. "He said thank you, honey."

Max wandered into the living room, with all its oceanic decor, wondering about how tonight had gone. How Billy had handled it. How Chrissy had fared through the unexpected change in plans.

Maybe she should have been there, Max thought. Insisted to her mom that Chrissy would want her at the house in case the baby came.

Instead, she had gone out with El, driving the winding roads of the county and throwing rocks at an abandoned barn. Well, Max threw them. El had launched a small boulder through the roof of the nearly collapsed building, the most destructive thing Max had seen her do in ages. She had gone out, done what bored teenagers in the boonies did with their friends, and here she was nearly regretting it.

Billy wouldn't want her to regret that. Neither would Chrissy. Their

last year of adolescence had been stolen from them by tragedy, while Max learned to deal with her incoming teen years with the heavy load they all shared. Billy had urged her many times to go out. Be normal. Be a stupid kid before life took it from you.

A new part of her life could start tomorrow.

Tomorrow, it seems, started far earlier than Max intended.

Sleep had danced around her that night, teasing her with half dreams before she awoke in her bed again. The sun had begun to paint her room a purple hue, heralding the morning's arrival. From the sound of the room outside hers, her mom was unable to sleep easily too.

Metal creaked as her feet hit the cool hardwood. As she walked out, hands absentmindedly twisted her hair into a lazy braid. The living room mixed the new dawn with a faint blue glow of the tv, Susan Hargrove sitting awake with a cigarette in hand.

"Mom?" Max called out quietly.

Susan jumped, ash falling from the lit cigarette. She quickly snuffed it out in one of Billy's old ashtrays, beckoning Max over.

"When did you start smoking?" Max teased, plopping on the couch. "And after you made such a big deal about me—"

"You hush," her mom said. "It's a stress thing."

Max lay down, letting her head fall in her mother's lap. Stared up at the older woman, noting with new eyes their similar features even in the dim light. Tender, maternal in a way that seemed to wish for Max to be small again.

"Couldn't sleep either, huh?"

There was quiet. A nod, and her hand pushed strands of copper from Max's face.

"We should be asleep, should we?" Susan said, not stopping to hear

the obvious answer. "I can't though. I just want to wake Neil up when I go in there, tell him the good news."

"You think he'll be happy?" Max asked softly.

Another question they both knew the answer to. One that, in the quiet moments where Susan thought Max was busy, had it's answer with her soft crying in the kitchen.

"I'll tell him before we leave for the hospital," she said, ignoring Max's question. "He can decide when he's ready."

"If he's *ever* ready."

"Max," her mother said sharply. "Don't be unkind."

"The truth isn't always kind," Max grumbled back, closing her eyes as her mom ran fingernails lightly against her scalp. "I don't think Billy will want to see him anyway. Chrissy *definitely* doesn't want to."

"She told you that?"

"Sort of. Don't take a genius to figure out she doesn't like him, Mom." Max stretched, letting her arm fall off the couch. "Can I have a cigarette?"

"I took it from your pack," Susan replied. "And no, not in the house."

"But you just—"

"If Neil catches you, he'll have a fit," she warned. Checked her dainty watch and gave a sigh. "Visiting hours start in a couple hours. Should I make coffee and we can take a long, lazy day nap when we get back?"

Max gave a nod. Cheeks puffed out before letting out a stream of air. "You won't get mad if I smoke out on the porch, right?"

"No," Susan sighed, giving a small grunt as she stood. "I very well may join you."

The first thing Max noticed was the relief that washed over her as she entered Chrissy's hospital room. No giant machines crowded her bed, the sterility of white walls replaced with soothing blue tones and a sweet message of congratulations tacked on the board.

The second thing was how normal both Chrissy and Billy looked. She was just settling back into bed, Billy guiding her gently as he whispered something that made her chuckle. Like nothing had really happened. Except it had, and the result lay in a bassinet next to Chrissy's bed.

Susan gave a gentle knock to the wood door frame. Chrissy perked up as she saw the two redheads, gesturing for them both to come in.

"Brought you coffee," Max said as she handed a cup to Billy. "Flowers weren't ready yet, sorry Chrissy."

"If I get a cup too, I don't care," she said, giving a tired grin. "You guys look like hell. Did you not sleep?"

"Hard to sleep with all this excitement," Susan smiled. "How're you feeling?"

"Fine, for now," Chrissy answered. "I can walk around a bit, so that's gotta be good."

"Was it bad?" Max whispered to Billy. "Did you see it at all?"

"Christ, that's morbid," he whispered back, giving her a little shove. "And no. Probably for the best, y'know?"

As Susan and Chrissy continued their conversation, Max couldn't help but be distracted by the pink plastic bassinet. Billy seemed to notice; he motioned for her to follow, waiting until she was close enough to heft the small bundle out.

Billy handled her like gold. A precious load that required his full attention, shifting her until the baby lay in the crook of his arm. Max had only seen him handle Chevy with such care when she was a kitten. Too aware that he was capable of breaking whatever was put

in his hands.

"Do you wanna see her or not?"

Max looked up at Billy. Heavy lidded eyes and a slack mouth were betrayed by the spark in his eyes. The same look she'd been given for years, once frightening but now just a playful annoyance.

A little wisp of blond hair peeked out from the pastel yellow cap. Below, eyes that hadn't seen the world beyond those walls. A mouth that didn't yet know the taste of sweet fruit. A button of a nose that had just been introduced to the dying vestiges of Billy's aftershave. All of her so new and impossibly small, cradled in arms that fiercely loved her for simply *being*.

Max had waited. Wondered what she would feel once she finally saw Valerie, if familial love could actually be strong from day one instead of the barely thriving creature she had witnessed most her life. Looking at Valerie, she knew she would had that same fierce love in her arms the moment she held her niece.

A smile. Max blinked a few times, drawing a breath as she shook off tears.

"No offense Chrissy," Max said, not taking her eyes off Val, "but I think they might've swapped your baby for a tiny old man."

"Ha-ha, you're the pinnacle of comedy," Chrissy deadpanned. "Try living in a pool for nine months and see how wrinkly you look when you come out."

"Can I hold her?" she asked, looking at Billy.

"Not if you're gonna call her an old man again," he said with a smirk.

Max rolled her eyes. "Billy, it's too early for your bull—"

"Just shut up and come closer. Hand her to Susan after, okay?"

It was a delicate hand-off. Valerie was heavier than Max had imagined, but the weight felt purposeful in her freckled arms.

Despite the chatter, it felt quiet around Max. All the questions she had been mulling over, the debate of UCLA, of leaving Hawkins and her family behind, seemed to sink away. Billy hadn't been able to leave her behind. And now, there was no way she could have thousands of painful miles separating her and Billy's family.

Chicago.

Chrissy always spoke about it. How much she longed for it to be the place she and Billy would settle.

Perhaps, Max thought, that's where she'd end up too.

29. dottie

With all the excitement, life still continued to go on. Chevy still needed to be fed, the flat tidied up, the front lawn cut. Billy had left the hospital reluctantly, the newfound weight of fatherhood making it hard to leave Chrissy and Val. Chrissy, it seemed, was happy to have a few moments alone, which annoyed Billy. Not much, but enough to get an eye roll from Chrissy.

Grass now cut, Billy headed upstairs to shower and get a change of clothes. As water rushed over him, the ache of his muscles from the uncomfortable hospital cot now apparent, he stared mindlessly at a crack in the sealant of the tile. Another thing on a steady list for later. Billy let out a noisy sigh, rubbing water against his face.

As he left the shower, Chevy started to yowl from the stairs.

"Quit it," he called out as he wrapped a towel around his waist. "You aren't gonna starve, Chev."

Another yowl. Billy squeezed out the water from his hair, mouth in a thin line. Wood creaked under him as he headed down to the main level, nudging the calico aside as he grabbed the box of her food. As he prepared to shake out enough to sate Chevy, the phone began to ring.

Eyes wandered to the phone. Maybe it was Chrissy's dad. He hadn't been able to fly in immediately, so perhaps he was on his way. Billy grabbed the receiver.

"Hello," he drawled out.

"Billy?"

His heart jumped. "Mom, hey."

"Hey, love," she answered, smile evident in her voice. "I just got to my room, figured I'd call you and let you know. How's Chrissy doing?"

"Good, good. She's been driving the staff up the wall since they let

her start walking around more," Billy answered, shaking kibble into Chevy's bowl. "Where are you staying here? Motel 6?"

"Oh, no," Dottie said breathlessly. "I got a room in Marion. I figured it'd be easier. Less likely to run into your dad."

Of course. Billy pursed his lips as he bent down, metal bowl clacking against the floor. Neil was always going to be the wrench in the plan.

"You could've stayed with us," he said. "Neil refuses to come by my place."

"I just feel better here." He wilted a little at the nervousness in her voice.

"I get it, Mom." Pushed his hair out of his face, tapping on his forehead. "You want me to come pick you up and take you to the hospital? Give us some time to, uh. Talk."

"I'd like that." The brightness returned to Dottie's voice.

"Me too," he mumbled. "I'll be there in a half hour, need to do some stuff at home first."

"Of course," she said. "I'll see you then, honey."

Nerves seemed to explode inside him.

Billy had known it would happen. Anticipated it in the dead of night, trying to find a way to dull them before the anxiety could take hold. This was beyond his expectations, a fireworks display worth of synapses firing beneath his skin, desperate to be released.

The contents of his stomach thrashed about until they no longer would be contained. Billy ran to the bathroom, gagging up the small breakfast he had managed to eat amid all the craziness of the morning.

His hands hit the cool tile as the toilet flushed, head leaning against the wall. Eyes followed the reflection of light against the ceiling as he swallowed hard.

Toothbrush. Toothpaste. Get your shit together. Move forward.

He hefted himself off the floor, ripping the medicine cabinet open to do what the mantra in his head willed. Tongue met with mint and brush, blue eyes in a storm as they watched themselves in the mirror.

As he put the toothpaste away, he glanced at one of the orange bottles in the cabinet. It could be so easy; just take a Valium and feel a little less today. Dull it so the worst parts of his brain couldn't kill the excitement and happiness.

Billy shut the cabinet door. Ruffled his hair before spraying a bit of hairspray into it, leaving the thought behind. He needed all of himself today, even if he didn't necessarily want it.

By the time he pulled up to the Holiday Inn, Billy had started on his fifth cigarette. Watched the front like a hawk as he flicked ash out the window, hoping all of this wasn't a big joke.

The engine went from a roar, to a barely audible purr as he pulled under the vestibule. He parked, leaving the comfort of his seat to lean against the car. More waiting. More prayers to nothing that this was real, that the anxiety was worth it.

And then, the world seemed to still.

He could see her through the slightly tinted glass. Blonde hair in

beachy waves around her shoulders, a polka dotted white dress. Straw yellow mules. *Dottie*.

Billy was sure his breath had lost itself somewhere between his lungs and his mouth. It had vanished as her face lit up, pace just a little bit faster as she exited the sliding doors.

"Oh my god, Billy," she said, voice hushed. "Look at you. That *hair!*"

He let out a laugh as she rushed into a hug. After all those years, he had kept the memory of her hugs and the faint smell of the sea mixed with cinnamon. Billy could swear he was seven again, pulled into a tight embrace after a scrapped knee or a good test grade.

"You look good, Mom," he whispered. "Real good."

"So do you, love," she answered. "So tall and handsome. Like a-a-a rockstar. Like Bon Jovi."

Billy let out another laugh, pulling away slightly. "Christ, anybody but Bon Jovi."

"All right," she laughed. "I'm sure there's someone much cooler out there."

"Yeah, his name is Nikki Sixx." A shit-eating grin and he tilted his head. "You wanna head out? We can grab food on the way. Hospital's is absolutely shit, Chrissy's going nuts."

"Is their coffee any good?" Dottie asked as he opened the passenger door.

"Barely passable," Billy reported.

"I'll take you up on that food on the way then," she smiled, ducking into the Camaro. "What a car."

"You mind?" Billy asked, shaking his box of Reds in his hand. He had never asked before. Had always said fuck it, after all it was his car and his space.

"Go ahead," Dottie answered, buckling in. "Does Chrissy smoke?"

"Not for the past nine months." A flick of his lighter and he exhaled out the window.

"And you didn't join her? How terrible." Her lips curled into a teasing grin, not unlike his own at times.

"Hey now, I cut down," he grinned back, happy just to have a normal back and forth. Dottie always had a bit of mischief to her, as suppressed as it was by Neil back in those days. It gave Billy a sense of relief, pride even, to see her flourish again.

"How long are you staying?" he asked quietly, eyes flicking up to the rear view mirror, then to her.

"Only a few days, unfortunately," Dottie replied. "My work would collapse without me for any longer."

"You're always welcome back, you know." Billy cleared his throat, giving a quick glance to Dottie. "And me and Chrissy, we're not always gonna be here in Hawkins. You wouldn't have to worry about him if you visit."

"You could always come visit me," Dottie replied, hand running through sandy blonde hair. "Marty would love to meet you. So would Erin. We could go visit your grandparents, even."

Billy felt his chest tighten. Perhaps Dottie had suggested visiting California for the same reason he suggested coming to Indiana. The introduction of new people into his life that had changed so drastically felt overwhelming. People who knew about him, who he used to be, and had a vision in their head of who Billy was and he wasn't quite sure he was ready to break that image. Dottie had known a sensitive boy, and kept that version of Billy with her all these years. He had kept a woman filled with light and fear in his head.

"Yeah, maybe." It was the best answer he could manage at the moment. "Grandma and Grandpa are doing okay?"

"They're enjoying retirement to the fullest," she chuckled. "Grandpa Paul's up to no good, as usual. Trying to convince your Grandma

Lydia to go to Hawaii.”

Billy laughed. “Hell, he can take *me* to Hawaii instead.”

“I told him the same thing!” Dottie exclaimed. “I haven’t had a real vacation in years. This is the first time I’ve flown since you were a baby. It was for your Uncle Fred’s wedding in Montana.”

“Jesus, that long?” Billy gave her a smile. “Chrissy practically lived in the fuckin’ sky for years. Roped me into flying down to Florida a ton to see her.”

“I bet she misses it.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “She does. Once Val’s older, she’ll fly again. I can’t let her give up something she loves, y’know?”

Dottie was silent for a few beats. Billy took a last drag, flicking the butt out the window as they entered Hawkins.

“I’m so glad to hear that,” she finally said. “That you want her to be her own person.”

“Chris has always done what she wants.” A hand brushed through his curls, eyes flicking to the rear view mirror. “If I tried to change that, she wouldn’t be the Chrissy I fell for anymore.”

In the droll of signing in once more to the guest list, Billy could feel Dottie grow nervous beside him. Manicured fingers tapped an erratic beat onto her purse. He remembered that noise too vividly. At least this time, there would be no screaming. No crying or desperate pleas for calm. Just Chrissy, hopefully chipper, and a baby that had started to recognize her parents’ voices.

He took her hand as they walked to the elevator. Gave a squeeze of encouragement, hoping she would find him to be a comfort. Dottie had been his comfort through the worst parts of his life; the least he

could do is give that back.

As the door to Chrissy's room opened, Billy's face lit up in a wide smile. Chrissy was up and about — *an impossible thing to make her stop, now that the doctors gave her the okay* — with Valerie in her arms. Swaying gently back and forth, singing so softly that Billy couldn't place the tune.

"Chris," Billy said softly, alerting her to his presence. "Got a visitor for you."

Chrissy turned around, giving him a questioning look before locking eyes with Dottie, who strayed behind him.

"I was wondering what took you so long to get back," Chrissy smiled, tilting her head. "I'm guessing this is your mom?"

So casual. Like Dottie had never been out of reach before, just unseen.

"Yeah." He nudged Dottie gently. "Mom, this is Chrissy."

Dottie's hesitation seemed to melt immediately, a glowing smile resting on her sun kissed face. Without any more coaxing, she walked up to Chrissy, giving her a quick once over.

"Look at you," Dottie murmured. "Billy, you never said she looked like a model."

Chrissy's laugh rang out. "Please, I'm barely dressed today."

"Still pretty as hell," Billy shrugged, a grin teasing at his lips.

He busied himself with packing a few things strewn over the armchair back into Chrissy's duffle bag as the two continued to talk. He envied Chrissy; conversation came so naturally to her with strangers. Lulled them into a sense of ease as she chatted about everything and nothing.

As Billy stood straight again, he noticed Chrissy giving him a look. Quickly, he joined the two women, giving Chrissy a kiss to her head.

“Do you have the camera?” she asked, eyes expectant.

“Yeah, ‘course.”

“Dottie, you want to hold her?” Chrissy leaned in as much as her body could allow at the moment.

Billy watched as his mother’s breath hitched. Like the moment had become more real with those words, with the anticipation of a child in her arms. Dottie nodded, lips pursing even with a smile to hold back tears. It seemed in vain. Quiet tears curved over her cheeks as Valerie lay in Dottie’s arms, unaware of her impact on everyone in the room. Billy quickly dug out the disposable camera, the clicks sounding out sharply as he snapped a few photos.

“Goodness, she’s so small,” Dottie finally said. “Billy was a big baby. Nine pounds, you know.”

Chrissy shuddered. “I’m so sorry.”

It only got a laugh out of Dottie. “I wish he stayed small a little longer than he did. You turn around one day and they’re suddenly running around the house.”

Billy took a seat on the bed, watching intently. He didn’t have much to contribute; even if he did, it felt right only to listen. Take in every last word his mother said, the stories that she might speak of that he had lost out on growing up.

Sharpness hit him deep, an envy born from lost moments and missed embarrassment from childhood stories told to friends and dates. The normal things that Chrissy and Max complained about. The occasional maternal smothering as you grew. Susan had never filled that void for him until after he was too old to be bothered by it.

Valerie will have that, Billy thought. She’ll experience it all and she’ll never know how it feels to miss out.

“Billy? Did you hear me?”

Blue eyes snapped out of their lazy stare, landing alert on Chrissy’s face. He gave a sheepish look, leaning back on his palms.

“Sorry,” Billy said, clearing his throat. “Run that by me again?”

“I was asking how long you were thinking we’d end up staying here.”

It topic of discussion that had filled many nights, but never seemed to have a concrete answer. Long enough to save up a little more money. Long enough for Valerie to get to know her extended family. Short enough that there would be no way for them to get stuck forever.

“Not sure,” he answered. “A year or two at the most. I feel like I’ve stayed long enough.”

“Where would you go after?” Dottie piped up. “California? I’m sure you miss it.”

Of course he missed it. Longed for the ocean and the carelessness of youth that it held. Billy had admitted to himself long ago that California would never hold him like it had in the past. Too many things had changed him, for better or worse, and it was best to leave what he had of his former home relatively untouched.

“No.” He itched at his nose, eyes flitting towards the pattern on the thin blanket draped over the bed. “We’ve been talking about Chicago for a long time. There’s an international airport there for Chrissy and we’d be close to her family, so...”

His voice trailed off. In the emptiness where words had been sat a disappointed silence. Billy wished he could tell Dottie that he’d come back home, that he would live three houses down and enjoy the sun and the citrus trees as he once did.

“I understand,” Dottie nodded. She bounced Valerie in her practiced arms, giving her a small smile. “As long as the three of you visit, that’s all I need.”

“Of course we will!” Chrissy exclaimed, giving Billy a knowing look. Like she was relieving him from the duty of making promises. “Pick a holiday, any one, and we’ll fly out, okay?”

Chrissy seemed to have soothed that disappointment. Her grit has smoothed out his sharpness so many times, and it seemed like she

had honed that ability so finely that it worked on anyone she pleased. He hoped Valerie would get that from her. That she'd inherit none of his jagged edges.

Billy stood, shuffling over to the two women as he pulled back his hair. Lips pressed into Chrissy's hair before he did the same to his mother. A token of affection he hadn't been able to show for what seemed like lifetimes.

Chrissy seemed to pick up on it, eyeing him before placing a hand on Dottie's arm.

"I'm getting kind of tired," she said apologetically.

"Oh, please, rest up." Dottie gave another smile; the gloss of her eyes was not lost on Billy. "You'll need every second of rest you can get, honey. Billy, we can get lunch?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "Lunch sounds good."

They had decided to grab food from the diner to go. It was a pleasant day out, the heat relenting for the moment. Billy could admit Hawkins had some beauty to it buried in its parks; it was there he let Dottie for their lunch.

It was mostly quiet as they ate. Where conversation had flowed freely before, words now hung without sound. As Dottie picked at the french fries, Billy watched. Took a sip of his soda before letting out a sigh through his nose.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "That we're not moving out to Cali."

Dottie let out a hum. Sometimes he could see himself in her actions so clearly that it made him ache.

"Don't be, love," she answered. "You can't base those big decisions off of me. Like Chrissy said, we'll see each other on holidays. During

summers. Whenever it suits you.”

Curls felt into his face as his head bowed a bit. With a shaky breath, Billy let it rest on her shoulder. Hoped that the touch wouldn't be too forward, too much for her.

A hand pressed into his hair, fingers sliding with remembered ease through the shorter layer of his wild curls. Knuckles brushed against the cut of his jaw.

“You remember I used to do this when you were little?” Dottie whispered. “When you had a bad day or you were tired, you'd put your head in my lap and I'd brush your hair with my fingers. You hated using a comb, always said it hurt your head.”

“I remember.” Eyes squeezed shut so tightly his forehead ached. “Mom?”

“Hm?”

“When I had my accident, I thought of you every day. That time at the beach, when I was surfing and caught that seven foot wave.” Billy swallowed. “That was one of the best days with you and... It just kept me sane. Kept me going.”

Her hand faltered for a second before dropping to his arm. He felt her squeeze him gently, laying her head against his. Billy wished he could tell her everything, let her in and see how she had saved him.

“That was a good day,” Dottie agreed. “I think about it a lot, too. You tracked sand all over the house when we got back, all over my clean floors, but I didn't care. You were so, so happy and I just—”

A small sob interrupted her. The hand on his arm left, flying up to her face to muffle the noise. He sat straight, emotion sitting heavy in his throat and threatening to suffocate him.

“Mom, it's okay.”

“It's really not,” she sniffled. “You should have more of those memories. Both of us should.”

But we can. The words didn't seem to materialize the way he wanted.
We can do that now.

Instead, he pulled her into a hug. Rested his chin on her shoulder as she gripped him fiercely. Nothing in him had the strength to pull away, even as she tightened further around his ribs. She was no longer a memory, but living flesh and a soul that had shed the burnt edges where Neil's anger had touched her.

"I wanna do this again," Billy finally said. "Just sit and hang out and talk. Get lunch and eat soggy fries and bitch about work. Normal stuff, y'know?"

"Me too, Billy." Her hug grew tighter. "I just wish we had gotten to do it sooner."

He let out a laugh. "You wouldn't have wanted to spend that much time with me a few years ago. I wasn't that great. Kind of a shit person, honestly."

He could feel Dottie smile into his shoulder. "You were still Billy back then, just like you are now. I would've liked to see all of it, even when you weren't being your best."

"You've got me now, though."

"I know." She paused, pulling back enough to give him a kiss on the cheek. "I know, my love."

Notes for the Chapter:

one more chapter... are you ready?

30. kintsugi

Summary for the Chapter:

Kintsugi: the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the pieces with lacquer mixed with gold.

November had settled into Hawkins in a blanket of fallen leaves and cloudy skies. A routine Billy had come to settle into over the years, bidding farewell to his beloved summer and waiting anxiously for the winter to sweep in. The clockwork of changing seasons brought with it a new routine, one he and Chrissy had begun to settle into quite well.

Four months in, they had found their groove. Diapers, broken sleep cycles, so much goddamn spit up that Billy himself wanted to barf sometimes. At the very least, Val had started to sleep on a more normal schedule. Some nights, Billy would sit up with Valerie, letting her sleep on his chest while he mindlessly watched reruns.

As the leaves had turned red and gold, Valerie had learned to smile. He'd often come home to Chrissy sitting on the floor, Valerie propped up in her lap, clapping their hands together as Val squealed with delight.

Tonight, Val was on her play mat, reaching for the toys Billy had picked out of the little pink chest that Chrissy's dad had made. His arm draped over Chrissy's shoulder, the two of them a mess of limbs on the couch fighting for what was left of the bowl of popcorn.

"Oh," Chrissy said, "I forgot to tell you, Karen Wheeler says hi."

He nearly choked on a kernel. "What? Why?"

She shot him a quizzical look, hand dipping into the bowl again before glancing down at Valerie. "I ran into her at the store today. We talked for a bit, she asked how you were and said to say hello. She was being nice. Or maybe she wants a discount on her next oil change, I don't know."

"Probably the oil change," Billy muttered.

"Max said you used to flirt with her back in high school." Chrissy's voice was nonchalant, despite the wicked grin on her face.

"That little shit." He let out a frustrated sigh, rubbing at the bridge of his nose.

"Never would've pegged you for a guy who likes older women, but what do I know."

"You're older than me," Billy shrugged.

"By a couple months!"

The bowl clicked to the coffee table, Billy embracing Chrissy in a crushing hug. He beamed as she burst out in laughter, trying to push him off.

"Can't help it if I like the cougars, Chris," he grinned, blowing a raspberry on her neck. Chrissy let out a squeal before laughing again.

"Get off me, spaz," she said between giggles. "I hate you sometimes."

"Yeah, love you too." A kiss this time to her neck instead of the offending raspberry. "Y'know, your hair's gotten really long."

"That tends to happen when you don't cut it."

An eye roll and he let go, shifting into the cushions as she sat up straight. "I was *going* to say it's the same length as when we first met."

Her face lit up, stars sparking in those hazel eyes as a flush tinged her cheeks.

"I didn't think you noticed stuff like that," Chrissy said, biting at her lower lip.

Truthfully, he had kept track in those little ways. Every haircut since then, he could tell the passage of time. Marked exactly when the best had happened and the worst. The night they had met was fuzzy at best in his mind, but everything about her was perfectly recorded in

his jumbled brain.

"I always notice," Billy said simply. "Remember when you tried that Sun-In shit and got mad none of your friends noticed? And I noticed it, like, the moment I saw you at school?"

Chrissy let out a laugh. "Yeah, and you told me I looked stupid because it was uneven on the back of my head."

"Exactly." He gave a wicked grin, giving her a peck on the cheek. "I'm never *not* gonna notice everything about you. It's hard to look away."

One Saturday, Chrissy had put Valerie down for a nap, leaving Billy to clean up what was left of the morning dishes. He'd watched her climb the steps up to the second floor, not giving him any acknowledgement whatsoever as he called her name.

Billy blew out a sigh, pushing hair from his face. She either was in a terrible fucking mood all of a sudden, or just needed some time to herself. Some days he couldn't tell which one was which until he prodded. As he wiped his hands dry, Billy checked Valerie's nursery once more before heading up to find Chrissy.

She had tucked herself into bed, a mass of pillows and the thick comforter needed for winter cocooned around her. The curtains he had opened had now been drawn again, thin lines of light leaking through the space where they hadn't fully met. Billy walked softly, making sure to touch the cocoon once or twice so as to not scare her. He'd gotten an earful once or twice for that.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

"Just not feeling good." Eyebrows furrowed together as hands pressed into her face. "Lack of sleep and all that."

The mattress let out a groan as Billy joined her, scooting so close there was no space between them. For all the vast spaces in Hawkins, he could close this one with ease. Just how he liked it.

"Poor thing."

Fingers pushed aside the loose curls of her hair as he leaned in, watching her neck tense and relax as lips pressed to skin. He basked in the subtle moan that rumbled behind her lips, heat collecting in his chest before spreading to every corner of his body.

"Let me make you feel better?" he whispered, lips grazing against her ear. "Monitor's on, we'll hear her if she wakes up."

Any hesitation seemed to dissolve into the hazy glow of light beyond the bedroom curtains. Chrissy pressed closer, lacing her fingers between his. A jut of his hips against her and she let out a soft whine.

She had taken to her lace and silk nightgowns again in the months after Val's arrival. A relief, he assumed, that Chrissy could find herself again in her clothes. Billy had no qualms; he liked the lace and silk. Liked how it hung against her curves, the way it felt between his fingers. How pretty it sat when he hiked up around her thighs.

Kisses continued their path around her collarbone and up her neck as he pulled that particular nightgown upwards. Let his hand meander in a teasing path to her core, grazing her newest scar as its journey ended.

They were a family of scars, he thought. Every single one had its purpose to bring them to today. Every one had felt lips press a healing wish to them. He loved it, and he loved her for her part in it.

"You're such a tease," she whined, pressing her hand over his. Begging for a harder touch.

"I gotta make you work for it sometimes," he smirked, tongue tracing the ridges of his teeth. "You've gotten so spoiled."

"I'm not spoiled!" Chrissy protested.

"Yes, you are," Billy whispered, fingers continuing their maddening

work on her. Another hitched breath, followed by a soft moan. “But I guess it’s my fault too, hm? I can’t say no to that face.”

“Billy—” She let out another needy moan. Pressed harder against him, making it difficult to resist the slickness he knew that awaited him.

Billy swore under his breath; removed his hand, digging for a condom before pulling off pants and underwear in one swoop. What Chrissy wanted, Chrissy got. It was the nature of things, and he’d oblige until the end of time just to hear his name wrapped in her voice.

Like so many times before, he slipped into her. A groan bubbled in his throat, mouth pressing to her shoulder as he rutted. Slowly at first, until he felt fingernails dig into the flesh of his forearm while she let out little staccato noises. Let her take what she had pleaded for in frenzied thrusts, all the while praying no sound would come from the plastic monitor at their bedside. Not until he was done. Especially not until she had her fill.

Quick pulses of tightness consumed him as she came, his hand pressing into the plush flesh of her hips. Billy wished he could crawl between those thighs, take his time bringing her to another peak before resuming the rock of their bodies against one another. Another day, he quietly lamented. Chrissy’s raspy moan as she pushed against him harder brought him back to the moment. A few more thrusts, and Billy had found his own end as she took his hand in her own.

There was no noise besides quiet panting, the occasional rustle of the bed sheet. Chrissy brought his hand to her lips, pressing soft kisses to his skin in silent bliss. No shuddering tears, which Billy always held his breath for. He’d seen them too many times for his liking.

She had cried the first time they had fucked since Val’s arrival, tearing a hole in the delicate webbing that made up Billy’s confidence. He hated more that she had to console *him*, soothe his fragile ego as she lay overwhelmed. It wouldn’t happen again. Billy simply hadn’t allowed it to.

“You’re okay?” he whispered, letting his face nuzzle in the crook of

her neck.

“More than okay,” Chrissy responded lazily, kissing his hand again. “Are you?”

“Yeah,” Billy replied. “Way more than okay.”

The chill had settled across Hawkins as the sun had faded behind trees and left only the moon and faint stars to watch over the sleepy town. The cold reminded Chrissy too much of time spent her senior year leaned against the Camaro, waiting for Max to show up so they could all go home.

But it felt like that was the point. Chrissy and Billy sat upon the roof of the Camaro, parked a ways off from their initial plan for dinner at Enzo's. Max had graciously babysat Valerie, allowing them a night for themselves. Chrissy had wanted to go out, eat a good meal and drink some good wine. Yet as they had neared the restaurant, she had found herself wanting to fall back into familiar territory.

A cigarette passed between them, smoke mixing with the visible breath in the air. She didn't mind the chill against her face or the fact that her ass was freezing against the metal. It was safe. Familiar. Unequivocally who they were.

“We can still get food,” Billy said, taking a drag. “Maybe not at Enzo's, but the diner's open late. Dean might comp you some cheese fries if you flirt with him.”

“He'd do it anyway,” Chrissy replied, pulling her jacket closer. “And I'm not gonna flirt with Dean. It'd be like flirting with my brother. *You* flirt with him.”

Billy let out a laugh that seemed to ring through the street. “Maybe I will. Might get a free burger out of it.”

It went quiet again, the sound of cars passing by and quiet chatter

from the nearby parking lot settling in. Billy passed Chrissy the cigarette, fumbling in his jacket for something. Perhaps his pack. She watched as a group of teenagers biked past, laughing.

Chrissy felt a nudge against her hand. Looking down, it was a brown velvet box, not unlike the one her beloved sun necklace had come in. One last drag and she flicked the butt of the cigarette to the curb, giving Billy a suspicious look.

“Early birthday present?” she asked.

“Yeah, you could say that,” he grinned. “Just open it.”

Chrissy could only stare at the box for a few seconds. With a pop, it opened; Chrissy’s breath hitched, eyes going wide before she whipped her head to look at Billy. His stupid shit-eating grin was plastered on his face, so proud of himself for what lay inside.

“You didn’t,” she whispered. A ring with a modest diamond held by delicate filigree sat inside. Not for long; Chrissy promptly took it out, placing it on her ring finger to stare.

“I was gonna give it to you at Enzo’s, but you threw a wrench in that fuckin’ plan,” Billy shrugged. “Felt like right now might be the right time, y’know?”

“Sorry,” she said absentmindedly, watching as it glittered under the streetlight.

“You like it?”

“Of course I do.”

“Good.” Billy stretched, draping an arm around her shoulders. “Because I saved up for a long time for that. You’re not getting another one.”

Chrissy burst out laughing as he pulled her close to his warmth. It was so typical of him, dropping such a beautiful and important thing in her lap and making a joke about it. She hadn’t imagined getting a ring while parked along the street, but nothing had ever gone quite as she had dreamt it up.

“What took you so long?” she joked, staring at the bauble on her finger.

“It wasn’t *that* long,” Billy huffed. “You could’ve had it earlier if Val hadn’t come along.”

“Oh, so it’s Val’s fault,” she grinned. “Even though you had *years* before that to do this—”

“Look,” he interrupted, pulling away to look at her. Even under the dim glow, those blue eyes seemed to glitter. “With you and me, things just always seemed to take a little longer.”

Hands clasped in her lap as she looked back at him. Billy was right; everything felt like it moved so slowly for them despite how hard and fast they had fallen for each other. A step forward, three steps back. It’d been an agonizing dance up till this year, never knowing if there would be a straightforward path.

But the dance had stopped as the new part of their life settled in. Chrissy had gotten what she had asked of him all those years ago. She hoped he had gotten what he wanted from her.

“You’re right,” she said with a sigh. “It was a big waiting game. Had to let it all fall into place, you know?”

“Well, I hope you weren’t waiting long.” Billy paused; a soft look blanketed over his face. “I love you, you know that?”

His calloused hand took her as Billy leaned in. A kiss bloomed between them, Chrissy feeling her smiling against his lips. Hands pressed against her cheeks as their kiss deepened, a giggle escaping her lips.

“You’re freezing, pretty girl,” he whispered. “Get in the car, let’s go show off that pretty new ring.”

“Sounds good to me,” Chrissy grinned.

The passenger door slammed shut as she settled in, Billy making his way to the driver’s seat. It was their natural habitat, beneath the sleek exterior and among the leather seats. Billy took her hand,

letting his finger brush over the new addition to her ring finger. Chrissy's heart leapt, unable to keep a smile off her face.

As the engine turned over, the car filled with a song that had been left hanging when they arrived, blaring as the sound of the Camaro roared down the street.

Candy, Candy, Candy

I can't let you go

All my life you're haunting me

I loved you so

Life is crazy

I know baby

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for taking this journey with me, some of you following this story over the past few years. A lot of tears, doubt, and stress came from this story, but I also gained a lot of confidence in my writing and an amazing friend.

I'm working very hard on a horror story I once posted here, reworking it for publication. Thanks to SATC/BOA, I know I can finish a story and feel satisfied with the ending.

My Moulin Rouge fanfic will be updated as well now that this is complete. I hope if you're a fan of MR or my writing, you'll give it a read.

See y'all on the flip side 🙌📺